

EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thesis

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND
SACRAMENT IN VIRTUAL REALITY

BY

BK HIPHER

Master of Arts in Theological Studies, Episcopal Divinity School, 2006

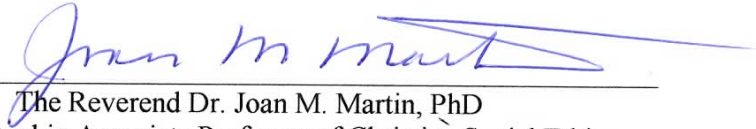
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

April 2012

© Copyright by
BK HIPHER
2012

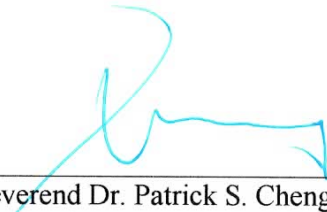
Approved By

Supervisor



The Reverend Dr. Joan M. Martin, PhD
William Rankin Associate Professor of Christian Social Ethics

Reader



The Reverend Dr. Patrick S. Cheng, PhD
Assistant Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology

BK Hipsher, "Through the Looking Glass: Identity, Community, and Sacrament in Virtual Reality" D.Min. Episcopal Divinity School, 2012.

Drawing on over three years of ministry in the virtual world of Second Life as a case study, this thesis explores the question, "Is online ministry ethical and effective for the spiritual development of individuals in the formation of a faith community?" We explore why many people are suspicious of the possibility of relating to others in virtual reality. Addressing the obvious issues of perceived and real anonymity, we consider how virtual relationships are similar and different to face-to-face relationships. Discussion of the effectiveness of the relationships, worship experience, and spiritual formation in Second Life will address what is required for the development of meaningful community. We then naturally move to consideration of what makes church meaningful to people, and literally what constitutes church. Delving more deeply into what makes church we outline how the church goes about carrying out God's mission; becoming a community of faith including the importance of worship, proclamation, service, and teaching. We consider the implications of pastoral ministry and the formation of faith community in Second Life. Finally we will consider where we go from here and try to look into the future for what questions and considerations might be coming next in virtual space and what implications ministry in virtual reality might have for real-life, face-to-face theologies of ministry.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the generous and committed faculty of the Episcopal Divinity School. These brilliant and talented educators, theologians, ethicists, historians, and pastors have mentored me for nearly a decade. Their constant support and encouragement have kept me engaged and honest. I will always owe them a debt of gratitude for their loving direction and friendship.

I make particular note of Rev. Dr. Joan Martin and Rev. Dr. Christopher Duraisingh. Both were instrumental in helping me think through the theological and ethical concepts contained herein. Their willingness to help me wrestle with the material helped clarify my own understandings and contextualize my own faith.

I want to also thank my dear partner, Rabbi Devon A. Lerner, who has made space in our life together for me to be absent so that I could attend classes, read many books and articles, and write, making it possible for me to finish these studies. Her love and support is one of the great gifts of my life.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Real-Life Relating in Virtual Space	12
Chapter 2 What Makes Church?	25
Chapter 3 How the Church Functions to Carry Out God’s Mission	52
Chapter 4 Communion – Mission, Ecclesiology, and Sacrament	57
Chapter 5 Virtual Lessons for the Real-Life Church.....	85
Chapter 6 A Theology of Transformation	99
Appendix	104
Bibliography	109

Introduction

I am the pastor of a church. My congregation is a bit unconventional. Often my flock is small, sometimes less than 10 people. Just as often this small group of people can include people from different countries, from many different Christian denominations, and often attended by people who do not identify with any particular religious tradition. The service happens each Sunday at 2:00pm Pacific Time. The liturgy is comprised of music, readings, a reflection almost always prepared and delivered by me, and prayers in which everyone present is invited to participate. We greet each other before service and enjoy conversation after the service catching up on each other's lives, work, family, and challenges.

In many ways the congregation is much like any other congregation in any church or faith community anywhere. But there is one notable difference. My congregation does not meet in a church in real life. The people who attend the service I put on each week are sitting at their own computer, in their own environment, interacting with me and the other people by moving an avatar around a virtual world, in a virtual building having real interactions, real spiritual experiences, real relationships. My congregation is called Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life. If you are confused just hold that thought and let me explain how I got to this point in life exercising my main ministry in a virtual world, online, from my computer that often is operating on a wireless card allowing me to run

the service from my car, from a hotel, or even from a classroom at Episcopal Divinity School where my classmates and colleagues can share the experience that I enjoy each week.

I was an early adopter of computer technology in the mid 1980's, the very birth of personal computers. While the use of computers in my experience was in business contexts, it is important to note that my business experience is in the photography industry. Images and music combined with text and story captured my imagination from the earliest days of color video monitors. The proliferation of consumer video cameras pushed that imagination even further and soon computers were capable of processing moving images. Technologically advanced video games began to capture the imaginations of "baby boomers." From the earliest days of console games in video arcades featuring Pacman and Super Mario, computer gaming became a recreational past time for many people. While I did not become obsessed with video games I enjoyed them from the beginning.

The attraction from my point was the fascination I felt when I moved a control on a console and determined the movement of a character on the screen. The interaction of my mind with the character on the screen was my first online experience of interacting with a computer screen and relating to an avatar. The Pacman that I controlled battled to outwit the character in the game that sought to devour my Pacman. As technology evolved, more distinctly human-like characters like Super Mario made the experience more engaging. Later, games like Doom and Tomb Raider offered more and more

realistic and technologically advanced characters that became closely associated with my own experience of identity. When computer games began to offer the option of multiple players in a single game, human-to-human relationship and interaction was possible through the use of a character on a screen that came to be known as an avatar.

In many of these games the user had choices of the appearance, gender, race, body type, clothing and other attributes of the avatar they used in the games. These options allowed for a more personalized experience of identity. This ability to choose how one's avatar appeared opened the advent of interaction between avatars each controlled by human beings. Technology now includes avatars interacting in relationship to each other.

Simultaneous with the evolution of computer gaming technology, email and Internet chat gave me the opportunity to maintain relationships that had begun as face-to-face friendships. The first instance of this kind of interaction was the experience of using the early Internet service called Prodigy to keep in touch with a close friend who spent several weeks in Berlin, Germany, doing research. A mutual friend who remained behind with me in Nashville was also on Prodigy. We kept almost daily contact with our friend in Germany by sending email messages back and forth.

This experience proved to me that typing into a computer to create a message that could be sent in a very short time could keep my friends and me up to date with each others' lives on a daily basis. It was clear to me and to my friends that this mode of communication was both a way to maintain an existing relationship and a vehicle to

actually enhance and move a relationship forward. Years later, I realized that this type of online interaction had actually advanced the intimacy of the friendship between the three of us. The combination of nearly daily interaction and the opportunity to communicate in written form was clearly a different kind of interaction than we had previously enjoyed in face-to-face or even telephone conversations. While the immediate response of real time interaction was sacrificed, there was something intangibly intimate about communication in written language.

As the years went by I began to make friends online with people whom I had not met in person. As a traveling sales person I used dialup connections on a laptop computer as a means to “visit” with people online in the evenings by using chat rooms on what was known then as the IRC, Internet Relay Chat. In one of these chat rooms I formed deep friendships with women from all over the world, relationships that have passed the test of time. One couple I met in those days have been friends for 14 years, one partner of the couple has died. Gratefully many visits back and forth from England to the US and Canada were shared and deep friendships were formed and sustained over many years right through to the end of life for one.

Fast forward to 2003 when I began my theological education by working toward a Master’s degree in theology from Episcopal Divinity School. In the years between 2003 and 2006, a voice and video service called Skype appeared on the scene. This free service allowed participants to move beyond voice chat in real time, beyond telephone conversations, all the way to real-time voice and video interaction. I quickly realized the

implications of this new technology for sharing information, making and maintaining friendships and business relationships, and began to imagine possibilities for educational opportunities and increased access to therapeutic and pastoral resources.

As the program progressed and I selected my thesis project for the Master's program, the focus began to settle on questions about the implications for theological education in online environments. My thesis project included a research project that analyzed online classes taught in different contexts by different professors. The project indicated that the missing link for theological education in online environments centered on the need for more immediate interaction than discussion boards could provide and the need for students to be constantly reminded that the people to whom they address their comments are not faceless names that read their discussion board posts at different times but rather are real people with real feelings, real reactions, real emotions.

Ironically, my thesis defense was my very first experience of bringing real-time voice and video interaction between a group of people in one place and someone else in a different geographic location. Gathered in a room at EDS were the Academic Dean, my advisor, a student reader for my thesis project, and myself. My second faculty reader was in her office in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, at Brock University. I connected my computer to a television set in the classroom, attached the video and audio outputs and invited Dr. Maureen Connolly to join us using Skype bringing her video image and voice into the room. She was able to see all of us sitting in the room and hear us speaking. Those gathered at EDS were able to see and hear Maureen. For all practical purposes she

was in the room with us, fully present, able to interact and participate in every facet of the meeting, except the hugs that followed my positive report from the committee.

It became clear that voice and video interaction in real time had the potential to overcome all the hierarchies and structures of anonymity that inhibited student and professor's interactions when using only discussion board based vehicles like Blackboard as the online component. Episcopal Divinity School stepped up to the plate in 2007 and invited their first group of Master's students to enter a program that allowed them to attend face-to-face classes during two short two-week sessions on campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and allowed for whole classes to meet in synchronous, real-time classes held online with voice and video interaction between multiple attendees. The software that made this possible is called Adobe Connect.

I have experienced several classes in various subjects getting to know my classmates during virtual face-to-face classes that allow the entire class and professor to see each other and hear each other's voices. We engage in a dialogical pedagogical model that is very much like sitting in a classroom together. I find these classes completely satisfactory and more importantly, I am able to attend classes that I would otherwise be unable to attend in face-to-face classes due to my complex life obligations. Some of my classmates are able to pursue their seminary education and vocational formation and discernment as a result of the accessibility that online classes afford them while remaining in their jobs, in their homes, in their communities; still able to work toward

degrees in theology. This access to theological education has the potential to allow them to follow their call to ministry.

After graduation from the Masters in Theological Studies in 2006, another year's study at EDS, and my ordination in Metropolitan Community Churches in 2007, I began to think about and explore ways that worship experiences, spiritual formation, and pastoral interactions could be exercised in online contexts. During a chance encounter on a trip to Europe, ironically with a woman in England whom I met in those early days of Internet Relay Chat, I was introduced to the virtual world of Second Life.

It is not easy to describe this virtual world if one has not experienced it. Imagine a very graphically advanced program that looks very much like a sophisticated and technologically complex video game. The difference between Second Life and a video game is distinct. In a video game the characters actions are programmed by the game. Mathematical algorithms built into the programming define how the characters in the game respond to the player and what the character will do next in an interaction. In Second Life nearly every entity with which one interacts has an actual human being driving it. An avatar that each person creates and modifies, with physical attributes like hair and skin color, gender and clothing, represents people in this virtual world. There are businesses, homes, and recreational activities like fishing, sailing, and games. There are churches, mosques, synagogues, Shinto and Buddhist temples, and more. Practically every imaginable faith tradition is represented.

I could see the need for a theologically progressive church. Although two other Christian ministries existed in Second Life at that time, there was still a need for a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) positive ministry in the Metropolitan Community Church.

Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life is a collaborative project between the pastors of Sunshine Cathedral and myself. Sunshine Cathedral is a Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) affiliated with the Center for Progressive Christianity, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins and Rev. Dr. Robert Griffin have provided the support and liturgical framework for the services that make Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life continue to happen each week. Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life is not just an online community. It is intentionally connected to a real-life church with a real-life congregation. The readings, prayers and other portions of the liturgy are the same that face-to-face congregations enjoy on site in Ft. Lauderdale. Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life is a multi-site location of the real-life Sunshine Cathedral in Ft. Lauderdale.

As this ministry developed over more than three years, some new challenges began to surface that required significant theological thought and reflection. Pastoral issues that come up in Second Life are often similar to issues faced by any pastor of any real-life congregation. Some significant and specific differences are apparent as well. Very often questions of sacramental participation in various rituals like weddings and funerals arise and must be dealt with in an honest and forthright way. As I began to look for resources that would help me consider the theological implications involved in these

circumstances, I quickly found a severe lack of published information addressing pastoral issues in online ministry. This project is a first step in addressing some of those areas. While the limitations and scope of this project make it impossible to exhaustively address even the most limited area, my hope is that this project might open the door for others to continue to do ministry in online formats, particularly in Second Life, and find ways to make that experience more beneficial both for the participants and the ministers who work in that environment.

This is the central question that this project addresses: “Is online ministry ethical and effective for the spiritual development of individuals in the formation of a faith community?” This thesis will answer this question using Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life as a case study.

First we will need to look at the reality that many people are suspicious and distrust the idea of having any kind of meaningful relationship using computers and the Internet as the vehicle for communication. We will challenge many of the assumptions that people often have about interactions in online environments. First and foremost we will challenge the assumption that church in Second Life is a substitute for real-life face-to-face faith community experience.

Discussion of the effectiveness of the relationships, worship experience, and spiritual formation in Second Life will address what is required for the development of meaningful community. The relational matrix that is required for face-to-face formation

of community will be interrogated to discern whether the same kinds of elements are necessary and what, if any, differences exist in real-life and Second Life experience.

From the structure of relational dynamics we will naturally move to consideration of what makes church meaningful to people, and literally what constitutes church. Using the four marks of the church: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, we will look at whether the church in Second Life meets these tests. While we recognize that these marks of the church as articulated in the Nicene Creed do not represent the diversity of perspectives in Calvinist and other traditions world wide, we use these marks as an organizing principle to compare and contrast the church in Second Life with the church in real life. In no way do we intend to imply that these marks are the absolute definition of what it means to be church in the world. Rather we use these marks as lens through which we might observe and pull into focus some of the similarities and some of the differences that exist between Second Life and real life.

We will move on to a discussion of how the church goes about carrying out God's mission; becoming a community of faith including the importance of worship, proclamation, service, and teaching. We will examine the central ritual of liturgical Christian practice, Holy Communion or Eucharist. Considering in some detail what the Eucharist is and how it functions in an incarnational theology, we will deal as frankly as possible with issues related to consideration of sharing Holy Communion in virtual space. We will carefully consider the possibility of Holy Communion in Second Life and address the challenges of proximity balanced with the extraordinary opportunity it might

afford those who otherwise have no opportunity to participate in the sacrament. In addition, we will consider the role and function the practice of Holy Communion in Second Life might have as a motivation to assist people in moving into their own face-to-face faith communities.

When we have addressed the thesis question and considered the ethical implications of pastoral ministry and the formation of faith community in Second Life, we will move on to the additional questions that arise from our inquiry. We will see how ministry in Second Life gives us great freedom to explore liturgy and architecture in ways that are sometimes seemingly impossible in real life. Certainly we will address the radical welcome that is possible from the vantage point of a ministry in Second Life. Finally we will consider where we go from here and try to look into the future for what questions and considerations might be coming next in virtual space.

Ultimately we do not expect to come to neat conclusions with easy answers and formulas for pastoral care and ministry. What we hope to do is begin to ask the questions that will require our careful, prayerful, ethical, spiritual, theological consideration as virtual environments, and particularly the virtual world of Second life, continue to evolve. This is an exciting, challenging, and sometimes painfully uncomfortable topic. With approximately 75,000 users online at any given moment in Second Life, we need to think theologically about what is going on here and how the message of the good news of the gospel can be advanced in Second Life and other online environments.

The virtual world of Second Life is based on gaming technology with advanced graphics, realistic avatar movements, implications for expressing emotions, and more. Some people actually do play games in Second Life using their avatars. But ministry in Second Life is anything but a game. It is real-life interactions between real-life people. Many of the things we can learn about what it means to be church and what constitutes identity in a faith community can be used in real-life face-to-face contexts as well as in online virtual ministry.

After all, when Paul wrote letters to the newly formed churches in the early days of Christianity he was “virtually” interacting with these congregations. His ideas, his words, his leadership and teaching were carried out to places he could not possibly have traveled to himself. Why then should we not consider the technological advances that will allow us to minister to people in remote locations who either cannot or will not come to a real-life face-to-face community? If we are serious about evangelism and the call to spread the good news of God’s love in the gospel message, we can do no other.

Chapter 1 Real-Life Relating in Virtual Space

Technology in general has the capacity to do great good or unspeakable evil. Similar kinds of robotics guide tiny surgical instruments to perform life giving procedures and deliver cluster bombs that kill and maim thousands in a single event. Computer and Internet technology make our lives both infinitely more enjoyable yet often hold us hostage to the world of endless email and instant communication. Arguably the technology that affects our daily lives most in our 21st century “real” worlds is the computer and other electronic devices that allow us to remain connected to online environments. These devices combined with wide bandwidth high speed Internet access that allow us to “connect” with hundreds and even thousands of people each day have become central to life in the modern world. Virtual or online interactions have, in the past, been considered less than authentic. Some have even considered these interactions to be dangerous.

As we use our computers, iPads, smart phones, Kindles, and other electronic devices that connect to the Internet each day, we are opening ourselves to the possibility that our interactions will be the object of surveillance by others who interrupt the signal and intercept the information. We come face-to-face with this reality each time we send

an email message or text message, each time we place a cell or VoIP¹ telephone call, each time we download a book or make a purchase online. The reality that our service providers, equipment manufacturers, and other large corporations with which we interact can and do gather information on our movement, habits, purchasing patterns, and more is part of our media driven life. The fact is that anytime we use any technology or even make a purchase on a credit card we leave ourselves open to privacy violations.²

Most of us have heard of persons who have been lured to real-life meetings after online interactions, only to find that the online persona did not match the face-to-face reality. We've heard the warnings to our children and even to adults to beware interactions in cyberspace, warnings that are not without merit.

As a result, many people decry any sort of online interaction as inauthentic because it lacks the physical reality of being in the same space. Yet everyday brings more news of ways people are finding to connect, communicate, and relate to one another online. More and more people are using online sources to find their intimate sexual or life partners.³ More colleges and universities are offering online learning opportunities, often

¹ Abbreviation for "voice over Internet protocol." This is a technology that allows telephone calls to be made utilizing the Internet rather than conventional telephone company wires.

² Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading On the Electronic Frontier*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000), 299-300.

³ Match.com, "Stay Up to Date: Introducing the Official Match.com Blog," <http://blog.match.com/2010/05/17/stay-up-to-date-introducing-the-official-match-com-blog/> (accessed February 17, 2012).

with entire degree programs available through online interaction and class participation. For instance at this writing the online resource Guide to Online Schools lists 195 accredited institutions offering 6234 degree programs.⁴ An October 2010 article in the *New Yorker* magazine chronicles the way social action organization has changed with the proliferation of Facebook and Twitter.⁵ The political landscape across the world is changing due in large part to the instantaneous modes of communications that can be established between thousands of people using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and a variety of other mass media options now available on the Internet.

No longer is the ability to reach thousands of people with a single message restricted to television, magazine, or newspaper owners. Online communications played a crucial roll in the revolutions in Egypt, Lybia, and other places during what has become known as the “Arab Spring” in 2011. These online conduits of mass communication precipitated governments using a virtual space “kill switch” to literally shut off people’s ability to communicate using virtual media.⁶ This reaction is evidence of the immense

⁴ SR Education Group, “Guide to Online Schools,” <http://www.guidetoonline schools.com/> (accessed February 17, 2012).

⁵ Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted,” *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell (accessed February 26, 2012).

⁶ Michael Teague, “New Media and the Arab Spring,” *Al Jadid Magazine*, <http://www.aljadid.com/content/new-media-and-arab-spring>, (accessed February 18, 2012).

power online communication and interaction has to affect change in the world. “The movements throughout the Arab world appeared to have imbued social media with an irrevocable sense of legitimacy as a tool for fomenting change,” writes Raymond Schillinger on *Huff Post World* in September 2011.⁷ In addition, as people become more adept at using media of all kinds to communicate and effect social change they become more aware of how media can be used to manipulate and spread misinformation. People who learn about the power of video media, for instance, by making their own videos, learn that “pictures *can* lie”⁸ when pressed into service to spread a particular ideology or viewpoint.

Clearly the vast power of the Internet and our ability to connect with one another can be used for both good and ill. Because some people choose to use these communication and relational opportunities for evil intent, the media and the underlying technology is not itself inherently evil. Like many forms of relating in life, including religious community and intimate relationships, we can suffer great harm or immeasurable satisfaction from online interactions. The fact that some people misuse these powerful ways of relating and communicating should not hinder our search to find ways to carry the Good News of God’s love to people in the context of virtual church.

⁷ Raymond Schillinger, “Social Media and the Arab Spring: What Have We Learned?” *Huffington Post World*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/raymond-schillinger/arab-spring-social-media_b_970165.html, (accessed February 18, 2012).

⁸ Mary E. Hess, *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can't Leave Behind* (Lanham, Md.: Sheed & Ward, 2005), 81.

Another critique often heard about online interactions is that the quality of relating in these environments is inherently flawed simply on the basis that people do not reside in the same physical space. To be sure, visual cues and physical attributes often are considered when relating to others in face-to-face contexts. The sound of a person's voice and their scent can inform how we interact with people when we are in the same physical space. As technology moves forward with increasingly intricate avenues for connection and the introduction of more and better ways to relate using video conferencing technology, we are able to move closer and closer to the experience of being in the same physical space with others by virtual means.

Let us take a moment here to acknowledge that the absence of someone's physical appearance might actually serve to keep us more open minded about constructing the identity of the person to whom and with whom we are relating. Judgments of a person's character, intention, intellect, and more can often be affected by our evaluation of their physicality in face-to-face interactions. For instance people who are overweight are often perceived as lazy based upon their physical appearance alone. A study at Yale University indicated that the assumptions made about healthcare professionals regarding people who are overweight might negatively affect the quality of care they receive.⁹ When we see a person in old clothes, perhaps needing a haircut and sitting on a park bench, we have a very different attitude than when we see the same person dressed and groomed well

⁹ Rebecca M. Puhl, Marlene B. Schwartz, and Kelly D. Brownell, "Impact of Perceived Consensus On Stereotypes About Obese People: A New Approach For Reducing Bias," *Health Psychology* 24, no. 5 (September 2005): 517-25.

sitting on the same park bench. In this way online interactions can actually open our attitudes to relating in ways that might otherwise have been inhibited.

Another objection to discussions of meaningful relating, and particularly virtual church experiences, is an underlying assumption that these forms of relating are a substitute for face-to-face relationships. While some people do, no doubt, use online relationships as a substitute for and even a shield against having real-life face-to-face relationships, this is not the norm. Facebook, as an example, has allowed people who were once in close physical proximity to one another to continue to enjoy a day-to-day relationship, sharing details of their lives that serve to maintain a connection and closeness even though they may be separated by huge distances, multiple time zones, or simply the forward march of time. High school and college friends, as well as extended family members, can now enjoy reading about the everyday minutia in the lives of their loved ones. This ability to enter a “virtual community” where small details of daily life can be shared can serve to enhance keeping in touch and increase the probability of having a face-to-face encounter that might not otherwise have been possible or desirable without mutual participation on Facebook.

Streaming live and archived services on the Internet are not so different from television or radio broadcasts that are still commonly produced each day. These one-way communication services feature video and audio recordings of real-life church services giving folks access to observing the service. Some even provide service leaflets and song lyrics that allow a person in front of their computer to participate fully. This kind of

participation in the service is still not an interactive relationship. While I may be singing along and voicing my responses, the real people in the streaming service are not aware of my presence in an individual sense nor can they interact with me personally.

In the virtual world of Second Life, an avatar represents each real-life person. Each person has the power to control how that avatar appears giving people the opportunity to mask or enhance their physical attributes. Avatars communicate by means of text chat or actual voice audio of the person animating the avatar. They walk into the physical church, pick up a service leaflet notecard, as one might pick up a physical paper service leaflet upon entering a real-life church, and follow along with the ability to respond in real time.

Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life features a liturgy that closely mirrors the liturgy conducted in the real-life Sunshine Cathedral on any given Sunday in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It is complete with music, readings of sacred texts, and a short reflection on the texts delivered by the pastor of the flock gathered there. Perhaps most importantly, the service affords an opportunity for each member to share prayer requests and thanksgivings with all of the others gathered there. This happens in real time with real people typing into the text chat sharing their burdens, fears, hopes, and dreams. After service folks gather in the courtyard outside the church to chat and catch up with each other. We sometimes discuss the themes of the day and often continue to share our lives with each other in the form of encouragement and celebration of things that are happening in our real lives.

Some of the people who come to church at Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life have not been to a real-life church in decades. Some are still suffering from various forms of spiritual abuse visited upon them by face-to-face faith communities because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The church has hurt these lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender real people. They need a place to heal and dip their toe into the water again before they can muster the courage to walk into a real-life church and risk the awful rejection and hatred that some have experienced.

Some people who attend church at Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life are exploring new theological possibilities and have no option for progressive theological worship in their own face-to-face contexts. They may live in rural areas where the only churches for miles around are traditional and conservative in their theology. In these contexts persons do not have a way to explore theological viewpoints like inclusive language for God or a theology of love and reconciliation instead of a theology of sacrificial atonement to offset the doctrine of original sin.

Others are mobility challenged and unable to physically go out to attend a face-to-face church. Age or physical impairment can limit a person's ability to travel to face-to-face services. Still others are not yet ready to claim their gender identity and attend services as a female avatar when their real-life gender performance is male or vice versa. Some people who attend are themselves clergy who rarely have an opportunity for communal worship that they are not leading. All of the people who gather together experience the reality of worshiping, praying, reading, and reflecting together each week.

They simply do it using the digital body of an avatar rather than gathering with others in physical proximity.

Social scientists are just beginning to explore how interacting in Second Life gives people an opportunity to learn by trying on different identities, playing different characters, interacting in open ended environments.¹⁰ It stands to reason that “practicing” going to church might play an important role in motivating people to desire to be in face-to-face relationships in real-life faith communities. The point of being in real-life faith community is to share each other’s lives and experiences. This is what human relationship is all about. Linden Labs is the entity that created, maintains, and constantly innovates to make Second Life more and more realistic and enjoyable for human interaction. Here is what they say about their mission: “Linden Lab's mission is to create a revolutionary new form of shared online experiences known as Second Life.”¹¹ Sharing real-life emotions and experiences in a virtual context is really what Second Life is all about.

The fact remains that while an avatar hugging another avatar is a pleasant sensation that comes with a certain level of a feeling of intimacy, real-life human interactions are far superior to avatar intimacy. Lest we be misunderstood, we want to be very clear that any and all virtual means of relating are in some ways less desirable than

¹⁰ Thomas M. Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 96.

¹¹ Linden Lab, “About Second Life,” <http://lindenlab.com/about>, (accessed February 26, 2012).

real-life face-to-face interaction. Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life may provide an experience that is an adjunct to real-life relationships for those who have no other option to worship either in the long or short term. However, the hope is that the church in Second Life would provide a short-term alternative to face-to-face church attendance when other options are not available. Church in Second Life also offers those who are afraid or skeptical to “practice” being back in a faith community. The hope is that this experience will make them more likely to seek out a real-life church experience.

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that church in Second Life or any virtual mediated form of worship is the same as attending or participating in worship or faith community life in real-life or face-to-face environments. Pedagogical considerations must include a shorter attention span by the participants and the opportunity to be multi-tasking during the service. That is not to say that people do not text, email, or check Facebook and Twitter during real-life services. In Second Life one’s avatar can be seated in the building looking as though it’s paying attention while one interacts with various other points of contact on the Internet without the slightest inkling that the person’s attention is not fully there. It is important to keep things interesting and keep the participants engaged. Shorter segments, slightly accelerated speech patterns, and the use of contemporary recorded music often augmented by the addition of text lyrics can keep people engaged in the service.

A common view of online interactions, particularly interactions mediated by avatars, as is the case in Second Life, is that they are not “real.” Some argue that since

one can create an avatar that is any gender, age, race, and perceived socio-economic class that one chooses, we never *really* know with whom we are dealing. We concede that this is true. And we would also point out that people can appear to be very different from their true selves in as well. The truth is, if someone intends to be dishonest about how they are in Second Life, they likely act in similar ways in real life. While we may have the perception that we know our fellow church members well, unless we are close friends with them spending significant amounts of time with them, we often know little more about our real-life fellow church members than we know about our Second Life avatar church members.

What is important is to understand a phenomenon that can and does occur in online and real-life relationships. When we do not have information we often “fill in the blanks” with our own preferred version of reality. If we know someone in real life, for instance, and we have no knowledge of their spouse or children we are apt to make certain assumptions about the missing pieces filling those in with our own ideas. This happens even to a greater extent in online relationships. It’s very important to ask questions and leave open information that we do not have in order to guard against making the kinds of assumptions that “fill in the blanks.”

Another assumption that is often made regarding church in Second Life is that sacraments are not applicable. We will discuss sacramental theologies and how they may be applicable later in depth. Making a blanket assumption that sacramental theology is out of the question in Second Life would be an error. Before we make rash judgments

and generalizations about what is and is not possible for sacraments in Second Life we need to look closely not only at what sacraments are but what they represent and how they function in our lives. When I received the ashes of Ash Wednesday on the forehead of my avatar last year in a morning service, it was a very meaningful experience. As I went about my real-life day meeting people with the black mark of palm ashes on their foreheads, I felt that I, too, was part of this yearly ritual that begins the pilgrimage of Lent. The fact that the ashes were not on my real-life forehead but rather on the forehead of my avatar in Second Life made the experience no less real or meaningful to me. Before we discount sacramental theology across the board, we will consider how or under what circumstances sacraments might come into play in a church in Second Life.

What is most important to remember when relating to and analyzing relationships in any kind of virtual context, including Second Life, is that real-life, flesh and blood people are present in conversation, in worship, in prayer, and in spirit. Issues concerning trust, conflict, and misunderstandings will occur. It is vital that we realize that real people are involved. Real feelings can be hurt. Real spiritual growth can occur. Real community can be formed.

This thesis project will deal directly with what it means to be church in Second Life. Some issues will be very similar to issues that arise in real-life face-to-face faith communities. Other issues will need to be handled with an understanding that Second Life affords us some interesting benefits and provides special challenges so that everything does not translate directly from real life to Second Life.

First we will need to look closely at what “church” really is and what makes Second Life church. In the next chapter we will consider what it takes to be a real Christian community using what is referred to as the “marks of the Church” to look closely at whether church in Second Life really is church.

Chapter 2 What Makes Church?

As we begin to look at church in virtual space the first question we must address is this: what makes church... church? We know that it is certainly more than a building with a steeple or a bell tower. We know that it is more than a group of people who meet once a week for worship. We have even come to understand that church is more than a hierarchical structure that supports a particular denomination. Let us then move beyond an apophatic view of what church is not and look at some ways we recognize “church.”

Perhaps the image that most Christians have of what church is revolves around the worship service itself and the feeling of community that forms around this act. Many people come to church on Sunday to feel a part of something, to find community. To be sure, the ritual gathering of people together is part of what makes community. Some of the things we do when we attend church also give us the *feeling* of community. We chat with friends, we meet new people, and we greet each other with a handshake or an embrace. Often we share in theological conversation in Christian education contexts and we share our prayers, our needs and our fears. We work together, generally cooperate, compromise and sometimes agree to disagree to keep the community of faith together, the community we call church.

What we want to consider here is a deeper understanding of community, something beyond the club mentality that allows us to go to church on Sunday morning and then go home to our work throughout the following week without much thought or

daily activity formed by our participation in the community we all church. As a template we will consider what Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas referred to as a “community of character.” While Hauerwas’ vision is by no means a comprehensive view of what the church is, his general concept that the church “has social significance... as a distinct society with an integrity peculiar to itself” is a lens through which we can view the church in real-life face-to-face interaction and compare the church in Second Life.

If we are to take seriously Hauerwas’ assertion that “... the most important social task of Christians is to be nothing less than a community capable of forming people with virtues sufficient to witness to God’s truth in the world...[and] the task of the church... is to become a polity that has the character necessary to survive as a truthful society,”¹² then we must look at how personhood itself is developed. In order to evaluate whether the church can or is forming persons of character, we must first look at how persons are formed.

If forming virtue in the individual is the goal of a community of character, then the enterprise quickly becomes a “which came first, the chicken or the egg” endeavor. So we must address a question, what does it mean to be virtuous or to have character? Taking as fact Haurwas’ assertion that “...[a]n ethic of virtue centers on the claim that an agent’s being is prior to doing,”¹³ we arrive at an immediate understanding of the

¹² Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 3.

¹³ Ibid, 113.

importance of the church in the formation of individual character and as a model for other communities of character. If a person's character determines their ability to view the world in such a way as to make decisions about what actions to take, or not take, then we must take seriously the work of the formation of a person. We can hardly fault people for making poor decisions or taking no action in matters of injustice if these very same people have no option for accessing a community of character within which their own character can be developed and formed.

Here is where the church begins the dialogue and interaction with the world. Hauerwas contends that it is the role of the church to be active in the process of infusing character or virtue into a world that does not, in and of itself, possess the capacity to become virtuous. Hauerwas says that Christian "symbols" and "myths" have a particular function within the larger society and these inform how we are to act in relation to one another.¹⁴

How these symbols and myths are communicated is through the Christian narrative, the telling and retelling of the Christian story. That story or narrative is communicated in three very distinct ways using what the Anglican tradition calls "scripture, tradition, and reason." In a face-to-face "real" world context the church accomplishes the transmission and teaching of the Christian story using all three vehicles as means for telling the story in various ways.

¹⁴ Ibid, 2.

The reading of scripture in services, preaching, and teaching based on those sacred texts is a way to take up some of the particular details of the narrative and deal with them. In no way do I mean to exclude the use of other sacred texts beyond the Hebrew and Christian testaments found in what Christians refer to as the Bible. I simply want to call attention to the fact that the written textual version of our story is contained therein. So it is important that these scriptural texts be used as a pivotal basis upon which preaching and teaching within the context of the church occurs. This is accomplished in conventional face-to-face contexts by having the text read, followed by some form of interpretation or commentary upon that reading to give background from within the text, to provide historical context if possible, and then to make some connections to our daily life in a post-modern 21st century world.

The traditions of the church also function to transmit the narrative. These traditions must be viewed with a critical eye constantly evaluating the efficacy of the inherited forms of the traditions to transmit the Christian narrative. Marvin Ellison speaks pointedly to this issue when he says,

For progressive people of faith and good will, the task can never be to transmit an inherited moral or religious tradition uncritically, but rather to engage in open-ended ethical discernment in or to critique teachings and patterns of practice as needed, as well as transform the tradition in more life-enhancing directions.¹⁵

¹⁵ Marvin Ellison, *Same-Sex Marriage? : A Christian Ethical Analysis* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 140.

One major critique we have of many face-to-face church experiences is what Professor Rick McCall, formerly of Episcopal Divinity School, used to refer to as the principle that “architecture always wins.” In other words, how we order the worship space itself says something about the story we are transmitting. If the leader of a service stands high on an altar above and away from everyone else sitting in rows in the pews, does that not give a clear image of hierarchy, power over, and God as something outside us, beyond us, rather than transmitting the story of the incarnate God here with us in the struggle?

Additionally we must look closely at the language of prayer books and hymns for they, too, transmit information about our common Christian narrative for better or worse. How often have we witnessed progressive pastors preaching liberation theology from a pulpit Sunday after Sunday followed by atonement theology encapsulated in hymns chosen with an uncritical eye, and all of this performed in a clearly hierarchical and often overtly patriarchal setting with pews in rows, little congregational participation, and the leader set apart and elevated both in stature and costume, not as servant or pastor, but as priest and ruler. Often there is no space made for individuals to share their own prayers and concerns whether in the form of supplication or thanksgiving with the community. By excluding this form of interaction there can be little opportunity for members of the community to collectively relate to the commonality of their own stories one with another and the commonality of their own story with the overall narrative of the Christian tradition.

If the narrative we are attempting to transmit in this process of character formation is to have any lasting effect on individual people, it must engage the story from within their own personal story. Put another way, they must be led to or given options in the preaching, teaching, singing, prayers, and even in the layout of the worship space to see a community that is different and distinct, even counter-cultural to the world. In so doing they can begin to translate the Christian narrative in a way that informs how they move as part of the community, both in and outside the church. Hauerwas puts a very fine point on this issue of inviting the members of the community to use their own reason, intellect, and experience in the process of formation as a necessity so that the church can "...become a polity that has the character necessary to survive as a truthful society."¹⁶

The church in face-to-face contexts has the opportunity, whether it makes good or poor use of it, to transmit the narrative of the Christian story in scripture, tradition, and reason. Even though architecture and repeating patterns of worship styles or patriarchal language in scripture, hymns and prayer book forms may challenge us, we do have the option to work against these forces. We can become more conscious of the messages that these less obvious parts of church transmit, even "re-forming" the words to reflect inclusive language.

In addition, we can provide opportunities for education outside worship environments to reinforce the stories that assist us in finding our way to mutual right

¹⁶ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 3.

relationships with our fellow human beings. Whether in the form of Bible studies, book discussion groups, or other curriculum designed for Christian formation, teaching is an important way to transmit our common narrative and give people the opportunity to think theologically about their lives. The enterprise of pastoral care can serve to provide a model for care and concern, for support and help for individual members of a community in times of trouble, fear, or uncertainty. Sometimes just talking out a problem is a valuable function of pastoral care in community, visiting a hospitalized or shut-in member or a loved one of a member, or offering other kinds of emotional, spiritual or even physical support, can serve as transmission points of the Christian narrative that forms the basis of a community of character.

Social justice actions taken collectively by members of the community of character can serve as a powerful witness to the Christian narrative in action. The stories of Jesus and his interactions with human beings in the gospels are critical to the narrative of Christianity as a whole. When Jesus encountered people, often they were changed. Sometimes we see Jesus himself changed by these interactions, as in the story of the Syro-Phoenecian woman¹⁷ in Mark's gospel wherein her response to his arguably disrespectful rebuff to her request caused him to re-evaluate his action and grant her request. These gospel stories are designed to show us a picture of what doing justice looks like in various human interactions and leads us to an understanding of what it means to be in right relation with God and our fellow human beings. Or, as Daniel

¹⁷ Mark 7:24-30

Harrington and James Keenan put it, “The mission of Jesus is to make possible again our right relation with God...and his coming among us is described ... as the revelation and manifestation of the justice of God.”¹⁸ Just as Jesus’ actions are embedded in our Christian narrative as the bedrock that forms our faith, so too our action or inaction on justice issues becomes evidence of whether we have, in fact, been formed by the narrative of the community of character we call the church.

Some of this commitment to justice comes in the form of simply resisting the dominant cultural norms that allow us to act, or avoid action, in ways that are clearly counter to the overall story of the Christian narrative that teaches us to live together in mutual right relation. This resistance can be hard because it “goes against the grain” of everything we know in this society and the world. We are constantly formed and informed by the communities with which we identify. So, the community of character that we call the church becomes vital to our ability to know what is virtuous, what is right, how to act and react. Beverly Wildung Harrison suggests that such resistance to status-quo cultural norms calls for our ability to act in ways that are counter-cultural to the world’s values. What is required is support from an alternative community. She says, “Such resistance is not possible in isolation; it becomes a life option only in and through

¹⁸ Daniel J. Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics : Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, Md: Sheed & Ward, 2002), 130.

the experience of communities of resistance.”¹⁹ Therefore this community of character makes possible not only our formation as persons of character but our formation as agents of action in the world. The evidence of this formation is noted by working for justice and against embedded dynamics of power that perpetuate privilege systems that benefit a few while oppressing many, including ourselves.

Modern and postmodern society, certainly society as it exists in the 21st century, has very different notions of what constitutes community compared to previous centuries. Arguably the advent of the World Wide Web, or the Internet as it is now called, has changed the nature of what it means to be in community. Whereas social institutions and particularly the church functioned as one of the main forms of community in past times, social networking sites and tools for interacting online have expanded our ability to be in community. Some deride this development as technology functioning to further isolate people one from another. However, others find the ability to communicate, the enjoyment of media presentations including worship services, and even participation in virtual worlds, a welcome development that allows more and more diverse opportunities to form and participate in community. Many of us depend heavily on access to the Internet for day to day information and interaction by email or text message. Some of us enjoy the opportunity to be in closer contact with our friends by using social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Even political and social movements for justice now exercise the

¹⁹ Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Justice in the Making* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 186.

power of community action using technology as was evidenced by the use of Twitter and Facebook in the recent uprisings over election corruption in Iran or the “Occupy Movement” globally.

Furthermore, people who live in isolated locations or who have serious health or mobility constraints that preclude their ability to go outside their homes to form face-to-face community now have the option of interacting and being part of a community interacting over the Internet in various ways. From using Facebook and Twitter to communicate, to watching video online, to participating in text discussions, to interacting in virtual worlds like Second Life,²⁰ the Internet and technological access to community make possible a whole new and wide array of possibility for forming a community of character.

We want to look more closely at the particular manifestation of church in Second Life called Sunshine Cathedral of Second Life. This Metropolitan Community Church is an outreach ministry of the real-life Sunshine Cathedral in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Service are held there weekly. The liturgy generally follows the liturgy at the real-life church, excluding the distribution of holy communion. Sacred texts are read, often by members, and the general themes of the readings each week are supplemented with musical selections designed to further enhance the participants’ consideration of the themes. A short reflection is offered by the worship leader to expand upon the themes in the form of contextual teaching and a call to action in real life often revolving around

²⁰ Readers can learn more by visiting <http://www.secondlife.com>

some form of social justice, interpersonal interaction, or personal development. Prayers are offered together and shared with the gathered community. Group discussions of matters from the personal challenges of individuals to world events often follow the worship service itself. The real people behind the avatar that represents them in Second Life share their everyday challenges from health concerns to challenges in their work life and families. A group study of Karen Armstrong's book *Twelve Steps of Compassionate Life* provided an opportunity for members of Metropolitan Community Church of Northern Virginia in Fairfax, to join together with members of the online Sunshine Cathedral and others for a fifteen week study of the function of compassion in human community. This book study, along with the reflection in the worship service each week, contains an intentional call to action to work for justice and live ethical lives based in the Golden Rule -- the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. It seems clear that Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life affords anyone who attends and participates similar kinds of opportunity for growth and spiritual formation as do face-to-face faith communities.

Some continue to question whether a person sitting alone in their home or office attending church as an avatar in Second Life qualifies as any kind of human interaction at all and whether interacting with others in the form of avatars has any possibility of constituting community. Rachel Wagner in her 2012 book, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality* says, "The problem is, both claims are true: we are 'together' in online space and at the same time by ourselves in front of a screen, connected via pixels

and information but often alienated in our embodied nature to the extent that we may know very little about the people with whom we craft what seem to us to be meaningful connections.”²¹ It seems an obvious point to make at this juncture that this phenomenon is not unlike the person who attends a large church for Sunday services, participates in the liturgy and prayers, greets fellow members, and leaves without making any other commitment or investment in the community. While these people may sit in the pews next to others in physical proximity, they lack any kind of emotional investment that would constitute membership in a community of character. Furthermore this kind of participation in worship without any real intimacy with other worshippers could hardly be viewed as the kind of relationship that constitutes a nurturing community that calls us to living an ethical life and working for justice.

One of the most common arguments against recognizing that church can be a real community in Second Life contends that the people who animate the avatars can misrepresent themselves in a variety of ways thereby thwarting any possibility of meaningful relationship. We insist that this dynamic is also possible in real-life face-to-face interactions. In groups that are large enough that anonymity is the norm and knowledge of the intimate details of people’s lives go routinely unknown, the community of faith is reduced a collection of individuals that are simply networking as they participate in corporate worship. Again Rachel Welch points to real community as an

²¹ Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2011), 128.

environment that encourages people to deeply know each other through friendship and connection that goes beyond participating in worship services or study groups.²² This kind of investment in intimacy requires a kind of vulnerability that goes far beyond knowing the facts of where someone lives or what they do for a living.

It seems clear that both face-to-face and Second Life church have the potential to facilitate a community of character, i.e., a faith community that transmits the Christian story, provides an ethical compass for living one's life, and serves as a call to action to work for justice in the world. Both of these contexts are able to provide a community where people feel known, affirmed, supported, and encouraged. Both virtual and face-to-face communities can serve as vehicles for the formation of the kind of community that has the capacity to bring us out of isolation. Both are capable of nurturing a community of character that we can call the "church", that gives us the ability to know what is virtuous, what is right, how to act and respond.

The church in the modern and postmodern world is diverse in belief, practice, worship style, and cosmological viewpoints. Some who call themselves Christian contend that others who do not believe or worship as they do are heretics not fit to be called Christian. The definition of church in its many forms is born out of the theological discussions at the ecumenical councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and

²² Ibid, 132.

Chalcedon, 381-451 CE.²³ These councils produced various doctrines and creeds not least of which is the Nicene Creed.²⁴ While the Nicene Creed continues to be recited in many churches to this day, all Christians do not subscribe to its formula for what constitutes the church. I refer specifically to the words "...one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."²⁵ These four words have become known in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and some other Protestant denominations as the four "marks" of the church, the signs by which the church may be recognized. By no means do we intend to assert that these marks are the only means by which the church can be recognized. Their use in this thesis project is intended to be a lens through which we might compare and contrast real-life church with church in Second Life.

The specific meaning in practice of the phrase "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" is the subject of endless discussions and debates.²⁶ Without question this phrase has been used as a tool of oppression requiring conformity of its members to whatever interpretation was dominant for the particular time in history. Moreover, these words have often been used as a justification to squelch debate and require conformity to the

²³ Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Spck, 2005), 240.

²⁴ Book of Common Prayer, (The Church Hymnal Corporation and The Seabury Press), 358.

²⁵ Peter C. Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 37.

²⁶ Ibid.

particular form of church prescribed by the empire that is in control at a particular time and place in history. Executions of all types have resulted from imperial and/or ecclesiastical enforcements of the meanings of these words.

What we will do here is look at these words, these marks of the church, more closely to discern how this phrase that has been used as a test for what is “real “ church might be understood in our time in history. We will determine whether these marks, *unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity*, have significance for us in modern times and how our interpretations of what real church is can influence our view of virtual church. We will hold these marks of the church up against the manifestations of Christian church that we see in Second Life as one possible way of determining its ethical basis and spiritual efficacy.

First let us consider unity. Given the reality that the church is diverse in belief and practice, at first glance the word unity hardly seems applicable. With so much diversity and so many ways of being church manifested in the various denominations and branches of the church, it is difficult to find any kind of “oneness.” Yet there is one singular focus for any group who claims to be Christian. That focus can be described in the words of Letty Russell as the “sign of Christ’s liberating presence in creation.”²⁷ Metropolitan Community Churches themselves have been denied membership in the National Counsel of Churches repeatedly because they accept lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

²⁷ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 127.

people as full members of the household of God. Yet MCC continues to identify itself as a Christian denomination based on its focus on what Hodgson refers to as “God’s redemptive action in Christ.”²⁸ It would seem that even when we disagree on what constitutes that redemptive action there is a peculiar unity in the belief that the life of Jesus, his death, and resurrection, have meaning. We still have unity about the reality of the Christic presence in the here and now, embodied on earth in our incarnation *as* the church in the world. Even as we disagree on various points of “oneness” in doctrine and practice, it is “God’s grace, not God’s power to coerce, [that] is central to our experience of Jesus’ message,”²⁹ as Pamela Dickey Young contends. She further pushes the point that the work of salvation resides in the “central task of the church as.... embodying God’s grace.”³⁰ From this position the fact that the church in all its diverse manifestations continues to exist at all is its point of unity. Leonardo Boff points out that unity in any form other than the embodiment of the “subversive memory of Jesus of Nazareth” only serves to prop up the hierarchies that seek to prescribe the conditions of unity.³¹

Within this framework the church in Second Life then is another manifestation of this embodiment like any other one. We understand that this may seem somewhat

²⁸ Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church*, 39.

²⁹ Pamela Dickey Young, *Re-Creating the Church: Communities of Eros* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press Int’l, 2000), 76.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroads, 1985), 114-115.

tongue-in-cheek to those who chuckle at the thought of participation in church in Second Life as embodiment at all. Yet we insist that the very fact that each avatar in Second Life is controlled, animated, and speaks through the agency of a real-life human being is evidence of actual embodiment of the avatar by a flesh and blood human being. “Real people...are the root of online relationships”³² like those formed in Second Life. And these real people embody the Christic presence that is evidence of God’s grace continuing in the world. While we may disagree on how we are supposed to carry out this embodiment, we are reminded of the words of St. Theresa of Avila: “Christ has no body but ours” even if that body is an avatar in Second Life interacting with other bodies of the same sort.

Unity, then, is defined for our purposes as Letty Russell expands upon it. “The unity of the church is a gift of the Spirit or presence of Christ...The unity of God with humankind brought about by God’s reconciling action in Jesus Christ is imaged by the unity of the church across barriers of diversity.”³³ All the more in our differences, our view toward God’s grace in the reconciling power of the Christ constitutes unity. Because Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life is a Metropolitan Community Church that welcomes everyone and celebrates the diversity of sexuality and gender identity, it is already on the

³² Wagner, *Godwired*, 128.

³³ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 132-133.

margins exhibiting “a relational ‘porousness’”³⁴ that welcomes everyone in all of their diversity while remaining part of a greater whole we call the church. In this way Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life is no different than a the face-to-face Sunshine Cathedral in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

The second mark of the church is holiness. The mere mention of the word sends most of us fidgeting and fretting since we are painfully aware of our decided lack of holiness in most of human life. Any discussion of the holiness of the church must first contend with the reality that the church itself is made up of people, fallible and sinful at times. How then can the church be considered to be holy? How can it even aspire to such a goal? First we must deconstruct the meaning of the word “holy” in order to begin to form an understanding of holiness. We can begin with what we know about what holiness is not. It is not piety or perfection. It does not depend upon our ability to do holy things or our capacity to be holy. Holiness with regard to the church is described by Thomas Aquinas as being rooted in the guidance of its members by the Holy Spirit.³⁵ So that what makes the church holy is neither the perfection of the institution itself nor the holiness of its individual members. Rather holiness is understood as a goal toward which the church is ever moving by the dynamic guidance of the Holy Spirit, ever at once

³⁴ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: an Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 108.

³⁵ Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church*, 41.

calling and pushing it towards its potential to be united with God.³⁶ This is the place “where the divine meets the human.... where God’s grace is manifested on earth.”³⁷

Letty Russell says, “The holiness of the church is ... derived from Christ’s presence and from the power of the Spirit to transform the church so that it can live in a relationship of righteousness and justice with God.”³⁸ This transformation ultimately hinges on our willingness to be transformed as individuals and our willingness to be in relationship with each other as a community of faith that acts on behalf of justice. Russell plainly states, “[A] test of the presence of Christ’s holiness in the church is how well it announces justice and denounces the forces that hinder the appearance of God’s righteousness in the mending of creation.”³⁹ I understand this to mean that the evidence that Christ is present and that the spirit is at work transforming the church can be determined by looking at whether the church works for justice and helps move the world toward wholeness.

Leonardo Boff cautions us to recognize that rules which demand obedience, submission, and humility of people to the church open us to manipulation and violence if

³⁶ Ibid, 42.

³⁷ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 108.

³⁸ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 133.

³⁹ Ibid.

we dare to question the power structures that support the status quo.⁴⁰ Boff encourages us to imagine “a new type of holiness” not based on compliance with the rules of the power structure for its own maintenance. Rather, our willingness to be militant can be based not only against our own shortcomings, but focused on our fighting exploitation and greed in favor of building a community of “balanced social structures.”⁴¹ He encourages us to strive toward “[n]ew virtues... class solidarity, participation in communal decisions, mutual aid” in addition to working against unjust imprisonment and persecution as we work in the cause of justice.⁴²

It seems clear that the likes of Thomas Aquinas, Letty Russell, and Leonardo Boff do not regard holiness as being seated in the righteousness or piety of individuals. Since most, if not all of us, fall far short of our own goals this is, indeed, good news. Additionally this august group also acknowledges that the holiness of the church does not depend on the righteousness of the institution we call the church. In contrast, they seem to agree that holiness is a dynamic process of transformation facilitated by the work of the Holy Spirit moving its members to actively work for justice.

Viewing holiness in this light thus demands that each individual community must wrestle with the call to do as the prophet Micah says is required of us, “To act justly, and

⁴⁰ Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power*, 114.

⁴¹ Ibid, 123.

⁴² Ibid.

to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”⁴³ It seems quite clear that the church in Second Life can move toward this goal just as surely as any face-to-face church. Holiness as a mark of the church becomes a dynamic community process with individuals and the community as a whole constantly working for justice and not simply conforming to a prescribed list of tests for piety that no person or institution could imagine obtaining.

Catholicity is the third mark of the church. Because the word “catholic” is most often used and understood in its proper noun form with a capital “C”, most people read the word catholic as Roman Catholic. The word “catholic” in the sense used here means “whole” or “universal.” Hans Küng suggests that this wholeness or universality is an issue of identity for the church.⁴⁴ Jürgen Moltmann says of the word catholic, “[W]hat is meant is the church whole and entire, as it is in Christ...the church with its inner wholeness is related to the whole of the world.”⁴⁵ This is a view of the church not as something separate and apart from the world but in relationship with the world; one in which the church is continually interacting in an intimacy that nurtures wholeness in both the church and the world.

⁴³ Micah 6:8 NIV

⁴⁴ Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church*, 38.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 348.

Letty Russell further expands on this notion of relatedness to the world saying, “[T]o be catholic is to be connected to all of creation in all its groaning parts and to take responsibility for the needs of the many different churches and peoples of the world.”⁴⁶ This is a very different understanding of universality than has often been enacted by a patriarchal church that insists that its own interpretations are the universal truth thus imposing them on everyone in a dominant, forceful, and often violent way. Russell goes further to insist that the church fulfills its catholicity by “living out a story of faith that witnesses to God’s love for [the] world.”⁴⁷

Leonardo Boff, himself a Roman Catholic theologian, suggests that the catholicity of the church hinges on the question, “To what degree does it make visible and carry on the relevant experiences of Jesus Christ and the apostles, serving as a herald for the ideals of fraternity, participation, and communion present in Jesus’ practices and message?” Boff calls for an “internal restructuring of the Church in order for it to be more faithful to its origins and better carry out its particular mission...” that shares power, invites participation, and establishes a “more just power.”⁴⁸ He suggests that we accomplish this by working for justice for the poor as a universal concern. This focus on justice for the poor insures that people do not become trapped “in their own class interests” replacing

⁴⁶ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 134.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power*, 115.

the concept of universalism across class lines and becoming mired in a self-reflective self-interested view. Boff reminds us that, “Rich and poor alike receive communion in the church.”⁴⁹

Obviously the catholicity described by Küng, Moltmann, and Russell would include church in Second Life as a matter of recognizing the universality of the church refusing to exclude this virtual manifestation. However, Boff’s concern for a recognition of class issues shines a light on issues of access and privilege that is inherent in a person’s ability to participate in virtual church in Second Life or any other form of online experience. It goes without saying that the poor often do not have access to the kind of computer equipment or Internet connection that is necessary to provide access to church in Second Life. On the one hand, the concept of catholicity would seem to demand that we include the church in Second Life as part of the universal or catholic nature of the church. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that the equipment and technology itself sets up exclusion of the poor and inhibits participation by those who do not embrace technology either because it intimidates them, because they object to its use of energy to power it, because they have never had an opportunity to learn how to use a computer, or any other reason.

Even while these exclusions are considered we must acknowledge that face-to-face church has limitations as well. Those who are confined by illness or necessity and those who suffer from mobility challenges have an opportunity to participate in church

⁴⁹ Ibid, 122.

that engages their theological tastes in Second Life when they might not otherwise have that access. Here we certainly see a balancing act between the inclusive nature of virtual church held up against the exclusive nature of online church.

Finally we look at the fourth mark of the church, apostolicity. Hodgson states without apology that the myth of apostolic succession is just that, a myth of legitimated authority emanating from “an empirical link between the original apostles and successive generations of ecclesiastical leadership.”⁵⁰ He further points out that this mythical model which has served to legitimate hierarchical and exclusively male leadership is “regrettable not so much [in that] this happened but that the hierarchical, absolutistic, and juridical forms were regarded as divinely sanctioned and eternally legitimated, so that the church was unable to change when new political possibilities and expectations opened up in the modern and post-modern periods.”⁵¹ The great disgrace is that the myth of apostolic succession served to freeze the church in a long past pattern of patriarchal hierarchy that has outlived its cultural contextuality. That is not to say that patriarchy is not present in modern and post-modern society, but certainly there is at least a tendency to question its legitimacy and there are ample challenges to its supremacy. What then is apostolicity if it has nothing to do with apostolic succession?

Natalie Watson refers to the Nicene Creed as speaking of “the church apostolic” rather than focusing on apostolic succession. She says, “[T]rue apostolicity is always the

⁵⁰ Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church*, 43.

⁵¹ Ibid.

apostolicity of the whole church, not that of a particular group of its ministers.”⁵² She envisions a community like that of the earliest Christian communities based on equality and justice for all people. Watson reminds us that the church itself must continue to grow and change if it is to remain true to its apostolicity. “Being church is... a dynamic process of transformation and change,” reminding us that we are the church in all our diverse particularities.⁵³ In this way certainly the church in Second Life fulfills the mark of apostolicity. The people who make up this manifestation of church may not fit the mold of what church looks like but it surely represents this dynamic process of change.

We look again to Letty Russell who says, “The apostolicity of the church is a sign of Christ’s presence in the life of the church as the true witness to Christ’s own story.” She points out that apostolic succession is the vehicle that some traditions depend upon to insure that the salvation story continues by ordaining the next generation of leaders. She says that others’ “apostolic witness” is realized when we see the quality of life improve for those who “live out the biblical story of the Christ... in their own time.” She insists that it is God’s liberating action in the world that is unleashed in the living out of this salvation story by the church.⁵⁴ Once more by this measure, if the lives of the persons who animate the avatars that make up the church in Second Life experience the quality of

⁵² Natalie K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008), 113.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 134-135.

their lives enhanced and are moved to work for justice on behalf of others, then by Russell's measure they are learning to live out the salvation story of the Christ and constitute the church.

Leonardo Boff describes a church that holds to apostolic succession as the evidence of its apostolicity as “an unbalanced Church structure” in which it is reduced to guarding “succession to apostolic power” without insuring “apostolic teaching,” denying the priesthood of all believers that was affirmed by Pope Paul VI.⁵⁵ His vision of the church as apostolic is the vision of one sent out. Boff reminds us that all are called to bear witness to “the news of God in Jesus Christ.”⁵⁶ All of us who create the community that transmits the living memory of the story that is contained in our sacred texts safeguard and preserve that story. Patrick Cheng points to the particular role that Sunshine Cathedral plays in apostolicity because it welcomes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in a ministry that is based on the Internet. He says, “[T]he sending forth of the gospel – takes on particular importance in terms of the increasing importance of cyberspace and technological advances in the queer community. Through such advances, queer people are able to form virtual ecclesial communities with other like-minded people, regardless of how much we might be isolated with respect to physical

⁵⁵ Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power* 114.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 122.

geography.”⁵⁷ Repeatedly the church in Second Life fulfills this apostolic view by gathering each week from many countries and time zones to read, study, to discuss the liberating stories that we find in the readings of the lectionary each week, and to send out its believers to witness for a new humanity in the liberating and justice-making Christ.

We end with the question with which we began, “What makes church.... church?” Certainly the church should be a community but not just a community of affinity where people come to hang out in a club atmosphere with those who are most like them. A different perspective views the church as becoming what Hauerwas describes as a community of character, teaching and nurturing the members, encouraging them to live ethical lives based on the lessons of scripture, the experience of tradition, and always using our own reasoning capacities. The community that gathers in Second Life each week for readings, prayer, and reflection certainly fulfills this mandate. Based in the reading of Holy Scripture, following an ancient tradition, it encourages those present to use their own facilities to consider how they can live out the liberating story of salvation in their own lives in the real world.

Using the lens of the four marks of the church, it seems clear that the church in Second Life meets the test of “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” The real people who animate the avatars embody the spirit of the living Christ by their very presence. There is no reason to gather as church in Second Life other than the desire to call forth the Holy Spirit to comfort, challenge, and guide. We have seen that it is neither the holiness of the

⁵⁷ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 110-111.

individual members nor the holiness of the institution itself that makes the church holy. Rather it is the motivation of its members to work for justice that makes the church holy. Certainly we have evidence that those who gather as the church in Second Life actively work for justice in both their real lives and in the virtual world of Second Life. They share their lives and their stories with us. They teach, preach, do academic research, speak out for those who cannot speak, and much more. They tell us that Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life encourages them and that they feel the support of other members as they go about their work for justice.

We have acknowledged that technology can be a barrier for some who do not have access to the equipment or Internet bandwidth that is required to participate. However, we also acknowledge that for some who cannot travel to a real-life church because of proximity, infirmity, or mobility challenges access to church in Second Life is a nearly miraculous vision of catholicity giving them access to an experience from which they would otherwise have been excluded. We would argue that to deny the apostolic function of the church in Second Life would be to deny that those who attend are sincere in any way. The people behind the avatars who gather there constitute a community that continues as the living memory of the story of the good news of God in Jesus Christ. In all these ways the church in Second Life is “real” church. Now that we have looked at what makes church let us move on to evaluating how the church accomplishes its goal of telling the salvation story and working for justice in the world.

Chapter 3 How the Church Functions to Carry Out God's Mission⁵⁸

Now that we have looked carefully at what the church is we turn to what the church *does*. Too often we hear church folks refer to the “mission of the church” or worse yet refer to the church “doing mission work.” This inward looking “church-shaped mission”⁵⁹ is an utter misunderstanding of what the church is supposed to be about. The church does not *do* mission work. The church's purpose is to carry out God's mission in the world.

Before we can look at various ways the Church can carry out God's mission it is important to set out an understanding of God's mission in the world. God is already at work in the world. As Christians we learn about this mission in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The gospels are filled with stories of the work of God's love in the world. Jesus embodied that love and taught anyone who would listen about that inclusive, unconditional love. The work of love in the world is God's mission. It is the ministry of the church to carry out that mission. What the church does and how it

⁵⁸ Christopher Duraisingh, “Encountering Difference in a Plural World: A Pentecost Paradigm for Mission,” in *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, ed. Ian T. Douglas (New York: Church Publishing, 2002), 171.

⁵⁹ Christopher Duraisingh, “From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church,” *The Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 9-10.

functions is, in the words of Christopher Duraisingh, “only a response, and primarily a witness shaped by first discerning the Spirit who is already at work.”⁶⁰

It is important to note that the church is not the only agent through which God’s mission is mediated. Other faith traditions also participate in the mission to spread the Good News of God’s love. To think otherwise would set up and “insider/outsider” attitude that assumes the supersessionism of Christianity. This kind in interpretation leads to the kinds of exclusivism that God’s love blows apart.⁶¹

It may be useful to briefly review some of the unfortunate misconceptions that exist about the nature of God’s mission and what the function of the church is in carrying out that mission. One such view is to concentrate on the mission of the Church, rather than the mission of God, as a means to activate the return of Christ and the end of the world so that we can all live peacefully together in eternity with God. Various scriptural passages, notably Mark 13:10, Revelation 6:1-8, Revelation 11:13, and Revelation 14:6-7, illustrate the necessity of spreading the gospel and preaching to all nations as something that necessarily precedes the eschatological birth of eternity and an end to the violence that leads to it.⁶² This view looks beyond issues of human suffering and injustice in this world and concentrates on the anticipation of the world to come. This

⁶⁰ Christopher Duraisingh, “From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church,” 11.

⁶¹ Ibid, 14.

⁶² J.C. Hoekendijk, *Church Inside Out*, New edition ed., ed. L.A. Hoedemaker and Pieter Tijmes, trans. Isaac C. rottenberg (London: SCM Press LTD, 1969), 30-31.

eschatological view has been used for millennia as a justification for the brutality of empires borne of an inherent inequity in power distribution. We find this view unsatisfactory and unsettling at best.

Of course we must also contend with what many Christian denominations consider the basis upon which they exist, namely the scriptural reference in Matthew 28:19 to what is often referred to as the Great Commission. This passage has often been interpreted as a supersessionist prophecy revealed in the resurrection of the Christ wiping out the history and religion of the Jewish people. This view holds that the redemptive work of God has been accomplished in the coming of the messiah. One need only hear of it and believe it in order to access salvation.⁶³

Another perspective, however, might concentrate more on the last few words than on the first few words of the Matthew passage hearing Jesus assurance, “I am with you always” and his instruction, “tell them everything that I command you” as an echo of the prophet in Jeremiah 1:17-19 rather than a supersessionist proclamation.⁶⁴ This interpretation would put the emphasis on God’s presence with us and on spreading the Good News of that presence in perspective as our animating principle for working to carry out God’s mission in our ministry and would take the emphasis off mission as the

⁶³ Ibid, 31-33

⁶⁴ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 54.

proselytizing of everyone in the world requiring them to necessarily believe in specific doctrines of the Christian church.

Christopher Duraisingh pushes back against the denigration of other faith traditions by pointing to Acts 1:8 as a point from which we ought to take our instruction for the mission of the church. Duraisingh encourages us to move from a focus of “church-shaped mission” to a more inclusive “mission-shaped church” that provides “a larger more inclusive framework.”⁶⁵

If the ministry of the church then is to spread the Good News of God’s love for us and call attention to God’s presence here with us now on earth, how then can we use the “functions” of the church to fulfill God’s mission? First we look to the assembly for worship. The weekly church service might look like it *is* the church. Often members of congregations tend to act as if this weekly meeting together for communal prayer, the reading of sacred texts, and the sharing some teaching on the topics of the day seem to function as if this weekly worship service is all there is to carrying out God’s mission in the world. Our liturgy ought to reflect the culture and customs of the people gathered so that it is relevant to their daily lives. The leadership ought to reflect the diversity of the congregation or expand the hope of greater diversity. In short liturgy should be the work of the people growing up out of their experience and their need for both comfort and spiritual growth.

⁶⁵ Christopher Duraisingh, “From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church,” *The Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 14-15.

Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life endeavors to utilize its worship in this way. While the basic structure, the lectionary passages that are read, the prayers that are said, and various other elements mirror the real-life service of Sunshine Cathedral in Fort Lauderdale certain accommodations must be made so that the liturgy serves to transmit the message of God's love for us and presence with us. The service is shorter, recorded music is used in place of congregational singing, and every effort is made to encourage members of the community to participate fully in the service. Time is made for prayer and quiet reflection so that each person may worship within the context of the liturgy in a way that is meaningful for them individually. There is also a great emphasis on welcoming everyone and encouraging those present to invite their friends and to come back regularly. So the weekly worship service itself is one function that can serve to further the message that God is here with us and that God loves us.

Proclamation of the Good News of God's love for us and acknowledging presence with us is another way we can participate in God's mission. It is important to include the reading of sacred texts that tell the story of God's work in the world from ancient times to the present. Some of these sacred texts are scripture of the Old and New Testaments that transmit the story of our tradition and preserve our common history. Other sacred texts are more contemporary writings that illustrate, in context, other ways we can help bring about God's love and call attention to God's presence in the world. Even our prayers are designed as a vehicle to proclaim God's goodness and encourage us in our work to further God's mission. Often the reflection given by the worship leader is both a message

of encouragement for each person on their individual journey and a reminder that those of us who live in privilege are duty bound to work for justice on the part of those who live in poverty and oppression. Proclamation in its many forms also includes “speaking truth to power” by pointing out that God loves each of us equally not favoring one group over another or rewarding some while testing others.⁶⁶

Proclamation is also a vehicle for teaching both about God’s love for us and teaching that our ministry is to spread this Good News. Proclamation in the form of teaching can take other forms as well. From offering book studies to chatting with folks after service, teaching infuses everything we do at Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life. The goal is for no opportunity to be left unexamined. Inclusive language is used throughout as a way of teaching that reinscribing gender hierarchies are not part of God’s mission. Care is taken in the selection of music to minimize the influence of exclusive or punitive theological viewpoints. Even the arrangement of the seating area in the worship space is used as a way to teach inclusion and community. This kind of teaching allows the spirit of God to break in and reach each heart in a very intimate way.

Finally we strive to transmit a message of service to others in all that we do. If we are not willing to be vehicles and conduits of healing then we cannot accomplish the mission of sharing God’s love. The work of repairing the world, bringing the message of the healing power of God’s love to everyone, can only be accomplished in our

⁶⁶ Larry Ingle, “Living the Truth, Speaking to Power,” http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers/living_the_truth.htm. (accessed February 27, 2012).

willingness to be of service to those around us in whatever context we find ourselves. We do this work by being present, by listening, by offering encouragement, by holding each other in prayer, and by working for justice both in the virtual world of Second Life and when we go out into the real world in our daily lives. Our hope is that we are transmitting a clear message that when we work for justice we are fulfilling God's mission to spread compassion, reconciliation, and love by being a real-life example of God's presence here with us on earth.

The church in Second Life moves out into the liminality of cyberspace to bring the message of hope to the people who are behind the avatars. If the church in Second Life furthers God's mission in the world, spreading the Good News of God's love, one can hardly argue that it is not real. However, it is not the fact that it calls itself church or that it utilizes familiar rituals that makes it legitimate. Rather it is its focus on furthering God's mission that validates its ministry and gives it real worth. In this way the church in Second Life is like real-life churches. The sole purpose of any form of church is to further God's mission by living out God's love and moving the world, even a virtual world, toward wholeness.

Chapter 4 Communion – Mission, Ecclesiology, and Sacrament

Mission and ecclesiology are inextricably linked in the Christian mindset. The earliest days of the formation of the church were rife with turf wars and battles over who was in charge and with whom the “Good News” would be shared. Our modern concept of church is primarily formed around who is authorized and allowed to take the message out to the world, in what form, by what means, and in what contexts. My experience in the virtual world of Second Life turned all of that on its head and led me to new understandings of what ministry and mission mean in online environments and new mission fields like virtual worlds. Similarly, Second Life has reshaped my understanding of ministry and mission in the larger context of the relation of creation to the Creator.

Ministry in Second Life begins, not with defining who we are as church, but rather in looking to those “in world” and discerning their needs. Time is relative in Second Life since many people gather from various time zones around the world. Notices and IM’s (instant messages) to group lists are the way to remind people that a service is happening and invite them to attend. Conversations with folks online at anytime during the week are also part of ministry in Second Life. Often people need to share their real-life challenges with their fellow congregants so this becomes an important vehicle for touching that divine presence of the Spirit.

The anonymity or perceived anonymity of Second Life interactions can be an important help in pastoral conversations. This perceived anonymity functions in a similar way that the analyst's couch or the screen of the confessional booth provides a boundary that allows for deeper sharing. In a similar way, the avatar interaction provides a level of separation that can actually facilitate frank sharing and more intimate discussions, particularly in matters concerning spirituality. So *how* we interact is a significant and important way that the mission of sharing the Good News of God's love is carried out. Greetings become the entryway to sharing and intimacy. Moreover, unlike real life, one person can participate in multiple private conversations simultaneously through the instant messaging function within Second Life. How we conduct these text chat conversations is very important and great care is taken to communicate effectively since the added contextual information of body language is not present.

Worship services become not an end in themselves, but rather the vehicle for inviting folks into relationship, prayer, study, and reflection. All of these activities are focused solely on one goal, to assist each person in accessing the Good News of God's love and care for us and to encourage each person to in turn share this Good News with others.

There are those who doubt that God is present in our interactions in Second Life at all. Some contend that since the physical body is not present in the interaction there can be no "real" sharing, no real communion of the spirit. Yet I

submit that interactions in Second Life are at least as authentic as those in “real life” not least of all because behind each avatar is a living breathing embodied image of God animating the avatar. The avatar becomes the symbol through which we interact with the “real person” not unlike the spirit of the Divine Presence that inhabits and animates our physical being. If we could understand that our “real life” is completely dependent upon and interconnected with the Creator as we are aware that our avatar in Second Life is so completely dependent and interconnected with our humanness, then surely this would be a revelation and a revolution in our spiritual understanding of ethical living and our participation in God’s mission. We call our avatar into being in a similar way that God calls us into being.⁶⁷ We inhabit our avatar in the same way that the Spirit inhabits our humanness.⁶⁸

Understanding our agency in Second Life as a vehicle for spreading God’s love to others can be a powerful symbol for how we begin to live our “real life” of fulfilling the mission of spreading God’s love in the world. Just as the purpose of Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life is to spread the Good News of God’s love to the people who inhabit the avatars there, so the church in the “real world” has a mission to awaken the divine Spirit that inhabits each human being.

⁶⁷ Duraisingh, “From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church,” 20.

⁶⁸ Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church*, 62.

From its earliest time, the Christian tradition has often been fixated on who is the leader and to whom the church should minister. In my lifetime, the churches I have known, from the small Southern Baptist congregations my father led when I was a child to the large Episcopal churches of my adulthood, are organized around professional clergy who lead a congregation that meets weekly in a building that is usually funded and maintained primarily as a place to meet for worship each week. In liturgical traditions like the Anglican tradition, the Eucharist has become the central “act” of worship and putting on that piece of “theatre” each week has become, in the minds of most of the congregants who attend these services, the primary act of ministry. Who is allowed to consecrate the bread and wine of the Eucharist and who is invited to the table to partake of it is the metaphorical image of hierarchy reinscribed in weekly worship services by a priest in robes standing on an elevated altar saying prayers and doing the “holy hand waving” of performing the consecration and overseeing the distribution of the Eucharistic elements.

Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) enjoys lay presidency⁶⁹ rather than holding that only ordained clergy are able to consecrate the Eucharist. Still there is an inherent hierarchy established in the fact that the Eucharist becomes the central element of worship and, therefore by extension, the central “act” of being church.

⁶⁹ Lay presidency is the practice of having someone other than ordained clergy preside over the sacrament of Eucharist.

The practice of many MCC congregations and clergy is to emphasize universal welcome to the Eucharistic table without restriction but the bylaws of MCC still say that membership is restricted to those who have been baptized. These written bylaws further state that participation in Holy Communion is restricted to those who signify “their desire to be received into community with Jesus Christ, to be saved by Jesus Christ’s sacrifice...and to commit their lives anew to the service of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, we see that in practice, many MCC congregations grant full membership status to people of faith traditions other than Christianity because often these people are as disaffected by their communities as are many Christians who find a home in these MCC faith communities. However, the exclusivity of requiring a profession of faith, the ritual of baptism, and participation in the Eucharist as the central act of what it means to be a faith community often alienates those who might otherwise want to affiliate with justice seeking people who strive to lead ethical lives working for peace and some sense of fulfilled life.

The word ecclesiology is often understood in terms of this hierarchy of defining who is “in” and who is “out” of the church as well as who is licensed to lead a congregation, consecrate the Eucharist, baptize, ordain and otherwise sit in authority within the organization we call the church. Surprisingly, the origins of the word “ecclesia” more aptly refers simply to the assembling of the people according to Peter C.

⁷⁰ Bylaws of The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches: as revised at General Conference XXIV, Acapulco, Mexico, Effective 29 June 2010, Article III, B2.

Hogson.⁷¹ This assembling in buildings that exist primarily for the purpose of enacting rituals like baptism, Eucharist, marriage, and funerals lends itself to the establishment and perpetuation of hierarchies that ultimately define who controls what will happen, when it will happen, and who will be included and excluded.

This gathering into what we understand as “church” happens in the midst of daily life complicated by the demands and pressures of work, school, family life, and leisure activity. In Second Life people enter this virtual world primarily as a part of their leisure life. In Second Life people gather together for the primary purpose of interacting with each other in some way that enhances their lives spiritually both individually and communally. This drive toward interaction means that the conversations before the assembly, the shared prayers during the assembly, and the conversations after the worship service are the primary reason why people gather in Second Life. However, it is important to note that the coming together of people in the context of a faith community is often facilitated by familiar signs and symbols of the church that people have come to view as defining what it means to be church.

Moving about in this virtual world by means of an avatar helps us unlock our more traditional ways of thinking and open up our minds to the possibility of

⁷¹ Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church*, 24-27.

new ways of thinking about “ecclesial embodiment”⁷² as we reconsider individual embodiment. Lewis Mudge reminds us that we would do well “to think of the purpose of social interaction as human empowerment” and be mindful of “the way power is conceived and applied,” asking ourselves if it enhances or diminishes people.⁷³ Certainly it is my goal to ask this question of every facet of how we interact in Second Life and make whatever adjustments we can make to insure that the interactions people enjoy at Sunshine Cathedral enhance people’s lives.

Since many people assume that the sacraments of a church (baptism, Eucharist, marriage, and perhaps to a lesser extent, the funeral service or burial, depending on denomination) require an actual embodied human to be present, there is a distinct lack of performance and participation in these rituals in Second Life. The absence of these rituals that often require leadership by an ecclesial authority (priest or ordained minister) serves to break down hierarchies and restore the community to a more egalitarian structure. Still, for those who need and want to participate in the Eucharist there is a yearning to experience this community ritual. For some, it is the central observance that reminds them that they are Christian.

⁷² Lewis Mudge, *Rethinking the Beloved Community: Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, Social Theory* (New York: Consul Oecumenique, 2000), 75.

⁷³ Ibid, 67.

Because Second Life specifically affords us the opportunity to further individual spiritual growth and the formation of a meaningful community of faith, we must consider whether Eucharist or Holy Communion is a ritual that can have meaning for virtual ministry contexts. The explosion of Internet access and our media-driven cultural context demands that we begin to ask questions that have, heretofore, remained unnecessary. For instance, we did not have to deal with the questions of full participation when television and radio were the only means of experiencing a worship service from one's home or other remote location primarily because the delivery mediums were "one way" in nature. The signal was broadcast out and there was no two-way communication. These delivery media were designed for broadcasting a sermon or service. They were not designed, with the exception of monetary gifts and the invitation to place one's hand on the television for prayer, to spur a dialogue that became a two-way communication. Even when email and list serves proliferated and provided the means to dialogue, still there was no visual and audio experience to go along with that kind of relational dialogue. Today we are quite capable of providing a streaming audio and video experience while simultaneously communicating in real time either in type chat style dialogue or even using voice/video communications. We live in a world where it is now possible to experience remote location relationship at a level never before understood in a faith community context. Now we can participate in church from our living rooms as an avatar attending church in the virtual world Second Life. We can invite our friends to attend church with us

regardless of whether or not we live in different countries half way around the world from one another.

Once we have invited these friends to church then we must wrestle with the question: Can people who are not in the same physical or temporal space share in a common paschal meal in a meaningful way? Is the receiving of the elements in the world of Second Life meaningful for the person whose avatar is participating in the ritual meal? In order to consider these questions, we must first establish what Eucharist or Holy Communion is and what purpose it serves in the life of a faith community and in the life of an individual. I use the terms Eucharist and Holy Communion, understanding them to be a symbol of Christian community enacted as a sacrament of receiving elements made from bread and grapes and remembering a time when all the disciples of Jesus were in one place sharing a last meal together. Hereafter we shall refer to this act as “Communion.” Furthermore, this paper will not deal with the question of who is qualified to preside at the table in the first place. To expedite our understanding of Communion, we will not focus on questions of leadership for the sacrament – ordination, apostolic succession, and the like; we will assume use of the role of “lay presidency.” The heart of our work here will center on whether it is reasonable and possible for people who are not at the same physical site to participate in communion together and take away from the experience an efficacious result for their spiritual lives. We will also explore whether or not sharing a virtual Holy Communion might be a means of building identity and community in a specifically Christian context.

I want to present my own notions about Communion before we sally forth into all the things that it can or might be. I do not view the sacrament of Communion as “the one full sufficient sacrifice of Christ.”⁷⁴ Since I reject the doctrine of original sin depicting humanity born into a sinful state in need of redemption,⁷⁵ there is no need for a sacrificial offering to atone for sins. Jesus dying on the cross does have salvific implications for humanity to be sure. However, the depiction of Calvary as the epicenter of sacrifice for the redemption of human sin and the only means of our escape from hell makes no sense without the assumption that all humanity is born sinful. Without this atonement sacrifice view of the crucifixion of Jesus, there is no corollary to the Communion meal depicting the sacrifice of Jesus’ own body and blood, as if upon an altar, for our redemption. The sacrament must then be viewed as something more than this traditional hegemonic understanding affords us. This sacrificial view is further complicated by the fact that Jesus and the disciples had returned, just before his crucifixion, to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover that still included animal sacrifice on an altar in the temple. If we conclude, as did Dom Gregory Dix in *The Shape of the Liturgy*, that the words of Jesus recorded in

⁷⁴ Paul Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 95.

⁷⁵ Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), 207-209.

1 Corinthians 11:24 (NRSV)⁷⁶ as “do this in remembrance of me” are unhistorical,⁷⁷ then we must conclude that the sacrament of Communion is not just a recollection of Jesus’ death on a cross as if that cross was an altar and Jesus death a sacrifice for our sins.

It is often assumed that since Jesus and the disciples had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast in the meal these friends were having together on the night before Jesus was crucified was a Passover meal.⁷⁸ In his book *Passover It’s History and Origin*, Theodor Herzl Gastor points out that over time the ritual took on new and different practices and shifted in meaning. Whereas the original festival occurred in each family’s home, it later shifted to the Temple in Jerusalem. Previously each family had slaughtered their own lamb and smeared blood on the doorposts of their home. As the ritual became centralized in the Temple, families brought their lambs there to be slaughtered. This would have been the time period within which Jesus and the disciples were living. Their coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover is indicative of this custom of bringing the sacrifice to the Temple. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE the slaughter of lambs was set aside but the consumption of unleavened bread with bitter herbs returned to a home based ritual. The point of Passover remained the same,

⁷⁶ NRSV indicates the New Revised Standard Version of the bible, authorized and copyrighted by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ, U.S.A., 1989.

⁷⁷ Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 55.

⁷⁸ Roger T. Beckwith, *Daily and Weekly Worship: Jewish to Christian*, First Grove Books Limited. (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books Limited, 1987), 27.

that is, to share the story of the liberation of the Israelites from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, to remember their deliverance by God, and in so doing to remind each family that they belong to a larger family. Speaking about the Passover ritual itself and how it evolved he says,

The central feature of the entire ceremonial was, as we have seen, a common meal eaten by all members of a family at full moon in the first month of the year. According to the Israelite writers, anyone who abstained was deemed to have cut himself off from his people.

Now, such eating together is a standard method, all over the world, of establishing ties of kinship or alliance, the idea being that a common substance and essence is thereby absorbed. Indeed, our own word *companion* means properly *one who shares bread with another*; while the Gaelic word for “family,” viz., *cuedich*, denotes those who *eat together*.⁷⁹

We are reminded that the sharing of a common meal is not particular to the ancient Israelites but is enacted in varied cultures throughout the world. Sharing meals is considered an acknowledgment and depiction of kinship. Therefore as Gaster concludes, “the original purpose of the paschal meal was to recement ties of kinship, infuse new life into the family, and renew the bonds of mutual protection at the beginning of each year.”⁸⁰

However, the meal that Jesus and the disciples celebrated does not conform to the order and elements of the Passover meal so neatly. This has lead Dom Gregory Dix and others to conclude that the meal Jesus shared with his friends was not the Passover but

⁷⁹ Theodor Herzl Gaster, *Passover: Its History and Traditions* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1984), 17.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 17-18.

rather a different kind of Jewish religious meal. Dix concludes that the meal they shared conforms much more closely to a formal supper called “*chabûrah* (plural *chabûroth*, from *chaber* = a friend).”⁸¹ It is Dix’s contention that Jesus and his disciples would have quite naturally understood themselves to be one of these “informal societies of friends banded together for the purposes of special devotion and charity”. The *chabûrah* took place in the form of a weekly meal held on the eve of sabbath or holy days.⁸² The meal constituted a means of binding together the group by sharing a meal and social interaction. The meal began with the breaking and blessing of bread, as did any meal for an observant Jew, and on a particularly special occasion the *chabûrah* concluded with the blessing of a cup of wine after supper known as the cup of blessing. The person who said the blessing then first sipped the wine and then passed to each one present at the meal.⁸³

Furthermore, as I previously said, Dix closely analyzes the addition of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11: 24b (NRSV) “...do this in remembrance of me,” asserting that Jesus had “no particular intention” in mind attached to the portion of the phrase “do this,” rather he was overlaying a particular meaning on this *chabûrah* implying that he would no longer be with them physically when they had their next supper together in this way.

⁸¹ Dix, *The Shape of Liturgy*, 50.

⁸² Ibid, 50-51.

⁸³ Ibid, 52.

Dix contends that Jesus knew that the disciples would meet again in this way but that he would not be there with them after this night.⁸⁴

This action appears to me to be the institution of an act of remembering not only why they are gathered for devotion and the building of community among them, but adding to this the remembering of Jesus' presence with them. I would further consider that he may have been reminding them to remember all he had taught them. This would include teachings about economic justice, treating others fairly, questioning religious practices that oppress and exclude, and reminding them to remain connected to each other whether physically or not, in the spirit of their devotion and work together.

Was the meal that Jesus celebrated with his friends the Passover meal or a special *chabûrah*? It seems clear to me that Jesus' blessing of the bread and cup combined with the sharing of each with others had a particular meaning for binding them together. Furthermore, in either case the meal was a repetitive act designed in part to renew the bonds of kinship and remember those not present, to acknowledge those who were also breaking bread in similar groups in other places, and to perform a practice that would go on long after Jesus was no longer with them in any case. The idea that Jesus was instituting some new practice is simply implausible. The only thing we might infer is that he was overlaying some new understanding of the practice of meeting together to bless and break bread and to bless and drink wine together, that specifically involved the remembering of someone who would no longer be present with them.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 55-56.

It is important to note that if the blessing had been only of bread, the significance would have been that of an individual act. The act of breaking bread and giving thanks was something that any observant Jew did when they ate a meal.⁸⁵ The addition of the cup brings to the action an understanding that Jesus is pointing to a corporate act, an act that brings individuals together into a community and one that encompasses one of their members even if he is no longer present.

Let us now begin to consider just what it is that constitutes Communion as a sacramental, liturgical action on the part of the church. A sacrament is understood to be “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”⁸⁶ This definition implies equal measures of individual intention and piety on the part of those participating, and a corporate expression in the outward manifestation of the ritual action we call sacrament. So, it is necessary to wrestle with the question, “What is the sacrament of Holy Communion or Eucharist?” We ought to consider the implications for both the individual and for the corporate body we call the church.

Clearly the form that Communion takes involves at a minimum the blessing and breaking of bread, the blessing and partaking of a common drink, and the giving thanks to God for the blessing of coming together in this act of fellowship. As a function of the Christian church we are also remembering Jesus, if not as a sacrifice for our sins, then

⁸⁵ Dix, *The Shape of Liturgy*, 62.

⁸⁶ A. C. A. Hall, *A Companion to the Prayer Book: A Liturgical and Spiritual Exposition of the Services for the Holy Communion, Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Litany* (New York: E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1902), 39.

surely as a model of humility and service, and a reminder to us that we are called to work for justice for those oppressed by systems of power. The eating and drinking *together* reminds us that as the church we are Christ's body in the world⁸⁷ called to do the work that Jesus started in his ministry among and with the disciples. We are not only remembering someone who is not here, but in the act of Communion believing that Jesus is still alive and present with us.

We are also reminded that we exist in this action within a context of eternity considering that as we live in human form on earth, we are also members of a celestial realm the transcends our earthly existence.⁸⁸ There is a sense that when Christians gather together to partake of Communion, time and space collapse so that those who have come before us as the body of Christ and who are now departed from the earthly realm are again with us.⁸⁹ “The perspectives of past, present, and future lie at the heart of the celebration...”⁹⁰ When we come together in the action of the sacrament of Communion, we are acknowledging that we are here now, that we are joined by all those who have died and are no longer with us in bodily form, and that we are joined with all those who

⁸⁷ David L. Edwards, *What Anglicans Believe in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Mowbray/Cassell, 2000), 96-97.

⁸⁸ Hall, *A Companion to the Prayer Book*, 32.

⁸⁹ Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism*, 96.

⁹⁰ H.R. McAdoo and Kenneth W. Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1995), 123.

are to come. In that moment there is no time or space. There is only an eternal bond of unity as one body.

We meet each other at the table as we are, with all our flaws and mistakes, with our agreements and disagreements even on what the sacrament itself means. It is perhaps in the instances we do not agree that we most clearly understand the all-encompassing nature of God. Our difference and diversity, far from detracting from the reality of our corporate membership in the body of Christ, enhances our interactions and enhances our understanding of God's creation.⁹¹

There is a sense in this meeting that not only time but also space is suspended. So despite the fact that we enact the ritual sacrament of Communion in a particular place it is no more localized to that place than it is localized to that time. We recall that Jesus taught us that the realm of God is within us, not residing in a particular place on earth. Quoting F. D. Maurice in his book *Kingdom of Christ*, Cosslett Quin gives us this important question on the topic of localization: "Is everywhere less a word of space than somewhere?"⁹² We assume that God's presence is with us wherever and everywhere we go. We can, by extension then, know that the presence of Christ and indeed the body of Christ itself is with us and in us wherever and everywhere we find ourselves.

⁹¹ Cosslett Quin, *At the Lord's Table: a theological and devotional commentary on the Holy Communion Service according to the Anglican Rite of 1662* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1954), 9-10.

⁹² Ibid, 17.

We have noted that there is little duality in our appraisal of Communion. It consists of not either bread or drink, but both. It happens not only in the present, but also in the past and future simultaneously. It is not constrained by a locality tying God's presence in the Communion with the risen Christ to a single location, but transcending place to be everywhere and somewhere at the same time. We include the communion of saints by calling into being those who have died and have left the world in physical form. In a similar way we come to the Communion table as individuals aware that we are part of body, part of a family of humanity, but also on an interior journey toward wholeness.

In this act we meet Christ again in a very personal way. As a sacrament Communion is more than symbol only. It is a manifestation of a reminder that we are not alone; we are companioned by God in the risen Christ on our journey through life and on into death.⁹³ This is a spiritual reality rather than a physical one but no less a reality. Christ's presence with us is a mystical presence. Participation in Communion provides a gateway to what McAdoo and Stevenson, quoting Richard Hooker, call a "... 'true and real participation of Christ,' the effect of which is 'a real transmutation of our souls and bodies from sin to righteousness, from death and corruptibility to immortality and life.' ... The inward hold which unites the believer with Christ is a present reality."⁹⁴ The presence we experience is not something that was past or is to come; it exists in our present reality for the purpose of changing us and assisting us to transcend the isolation

⁹³ Dix, *The Shape of Liturgy*, 256.

⁹⁴ McAdoo and Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, 140.

of individuality and move us into an understanding of ourselves as part of God manifested in the body of Christ. This assurance that we are not alone is so powerful that it has the capacity to move us beyond even the fear of death. Thus we are comforted in the assurance that the risen Christ is with us even as we move from life to death and beyond into eternal life.

The practice of preparing ourselves for Communion can also function as a constant reminder that we are in continual need of examining ourselves and our relationship to each other and acknowledging our need to be reconciled to one another. Monica Attias recounts St. John Chrysostom's four-part formula for reconciliation within the context of preparation for receiving Communion. First, we need to recognize and acknowledge our own sins and shortcomings. Second, we refuse to descend into resentment of others, take control of our anger, and forgive those who have wronged us. Third, we are to pray asking for God's grace. Fourth, we ought to participate in what is described as "almsgiving ... [for] it has great value."⁹⁵ This interior process puts in motion the action of reconciliation first of ourselves to God, then to others, acknowledging the necessity of God's grace to accomplish this and finally our desire to be reconciled to the world by putting our action into giving of what we have to those in

⁹⁵ Monica Attias. "Reconciliation and the Eucharist – Heart and World," in *Living the Eucharist*, ed. Steven Conway (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd, 2001), page 13.

need. Attias contends that we are bonded together in our participation in Communion, making it the “first and decisive step towards reconciliation.”⁹⁶

She asserts that our participation in a common ritual of Communion is essential for our understanding of what it means to be reconciled to each other in peace. “Our common life is animated by the mystery of forgiveness and reconciliation manifested in the Eucharistic action. This life teaches us that a religious faith that does not develop a theology of the other, a theology of reconciliation, is not credible.”⁹⁷ We experience this as a circular paradigm that begins with self-examination, extends to forgiveness of others, connects to the divine in asking our own forgiveness, and animates us to put action to our desire to be in relationship with God and each other by sharing what we have with others. All of this is symbolized and actualized in the ritual sacrament of Communion. We come as individuals, we profess our sins and our willingness to forgive, we ask God’s grace to reconcile us to each other, and we share the bounteous feast together. We come to Communion as individuals but we leave as one body of Christ taking the reconciling love of God with us into the world.

As a final word on our constant need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God and each other, I turn now briefly to John Calvin. He states, “Though some be more imperfect and others less, yet there is no one who does not fail in many respects. Hence the Supper would be not only useless to us all, but also pernicious, if we had to bring an

⁹⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 22.

integrity of faith or life in which there was nothing with which to find fault.”⁹⁸ It is important to understand that we are not assumed to be without fault when we come to Communion. We are not expected to be perfect in order to participate. He further states, “Only let us not come without faith or repentance.”⁹⁹ Our repentance may, at times, be apparent. Nevertheless, in almsgiving or other reconciling actions in the world, the condition of our faith and intention when we come to Communion is unknowable by others. We are left to work this out with God in our own way and in our own time. Hence we cannot make the argument that we ought not participate in Communion with someone whose character is unknown to us. Since it is not our place to judge another’s worthiness to participate we are best left to keeping our own house in order rather than attempting to condemn someone else.

At this juncture let us return briefly to the bodily, physical function of Communion. Just as we meet the spirit of the risen Christ and the reconciling love of God in the sacramental ritual of Communion, our bodies participate in the physical comfort and satisfaction of actually ingesting nourishment. Most of us resonate with the term “comfort food” acknowledging that food is often experienced as a way to comfort body, mind, and spirit. Food, or the lack of it, is an indication of who has the power in any given societal structure whether secular or sacred. “Where some eat and others do not,

⁹⁸ J. K. S. Reid, trans., *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, vol. 22 of *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 152.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 153.

food does more than merely symbolize power.”¹⁰⁰ The ritual consumption of food breaks down the hierarchies of power that otherwise relegate some to be fed and others to go hungry and starve.

Another element of the sacrament of Communion taking place within the context of consuming food points to a communal act of eating together and repeating the ritual aspects of the sacrament. “Food alone does not make a meal.”¹⁰¹ In the same way, the uniformity of the elements do not connote the true nature of the Communion meal. Rather it is a combination of food consumed as a symbol of nourishment of the body, done as a ritual act within a community in fellowship with one another symbolizing the nourishment of our spirit by being part of a community.

To summarize, I want to acknowledge that I am not unbiased in my appraisal of what constitutes Communion. I want to be clear as I move forward in this thesis what I am talking about when we refer to Communion. So to make it quite clear I will simply list the aspects that I have identified in the brief literature review and deconstruction of the act and function of Communion. For the purposes of this thesis project the list below is not exhaustive but certainly inclusive of each item.

- Elements of food and drink are blessed in the hearing and sight of all who are participating in the sacramental ritual, and those elements are ritually if not literally shared.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 33.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 277.

- There is an understanding that we recall the Last Supper of the disciples with Jesus on the night before his crucifixion. This recollection is a remembering of a time when Jesus was with humanity on earth.
- We meet the risen Christ in the sacrament of Communion acknowledging God's presence with us, assuring us that we are never alone.
- We come as we are to the table without expectation of perfection of body, mind, or spirit, and acknowledging our diversity.
- We come mindful of our need to be reconciled to each other and to God by means of coming to terms with our own shortcomings, forgiveness of others, acknowledgment of the need for God's grace, and a willingness to amend our behaviour and share our blessings with others.
- We acknowledge in the sacrament of Communion that God is everywhere and is therefore with us as we participate in the ritual act.
- We recognize that we are joined in each Communion service by those who have preceded us in death, by those who are not with us in a particular locale, and by those who are not yet born but whose lives are yet in the future.
- We consume the food as an individual act of physical and spiritual nourishment that prepares us to move forward into the world as community to serve the needs of others and work for justice.

Let us then consider the virtual world of Second Life. Each person who interacts in Second Life does so by means of creating an avatar, a representation of themselves,

that they then use to move about and interact with others in the virtual world. Avatars have the capacity to enact nearly everything that human bodies can do in real life. The real human beings behind the avatars interact, form friendships, make homes, have businesses, go to bars, sail, play sports, fish, and participate in all sorts of groups, including faith communities.

Each week Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life offers a service. Anyone and everyone is welcome to attend. The service consists of prayers, readings, music, and a reflection offered by the worship leader followed by conversation between those who have attended before the avatars depart the church.

Using the criteria I have articulated as the basis for what constitutes communion, let us consider what Communion might “look like” in Second Life: human beings gathering via their avatars in Second Life to participate in a service that also includes the celebration of Communion. Here, we must look closely at issues of identity and reality. It has been my experience that most people to whom I describe my ministry in Second Life often do not recognize the interactions of avatars as authentic human interactions. So, as a prelude to our evaluation of the possible efficacy of the sacrament of Communion in Second Life, it may be helpful to discuss some of these issues.

Many books and articles have now been published on the topic of personhood and identity in Second Life. One such work published in 2008 by Princeton University Press explores anthropological issues of being virtually human. Author Tom Boellstroeff claims, “In virtual worlds we can be virtually human, because in them humans...open up

a gap from the actual and discover new possibilities for human being.”¹⁰² What Boellstroeff is arguing is what has been my own experience, namely that identity and personhood in Second Life is not unlike living in the so-called “real life” or First Life in that certain assumptions are still at work that construct gender, class, race, age, able bodiedness, etc. What Second Life affords us is the opportunity to have experiences different from those we have in real life. For example, my avatar appears to be a female, dressed in male clothing, and using a male sounding name. Each avatar has a “profile” attached to it that is accessible by any other avatar that comes into proximity. In Second Life we have the option to self identify in any way we choose. I choose to disclose that I am a lesbian ordained minister in real life. Keep in mind that unless someone knows who I am in real life there is no way to verify that I am who I say I am. However, we live with a certain amount of ambiguity about people we meet in real life as well. What is fascinating to me is that because my avatar has a decidedly transgender form, I have experienced discrimination consistent with actually being a transgender person.

Additionally, we have had the great pleasure and opportunity to provide pastoral counseling to many, many people by sitting and chatting together with them avatar-to-avatar. Not surprisingly the topics of conversation that come up are the very same topics that come up in real-life pastoral situations. People still need to be reassured that God loves them. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people need to talk about coming out

¹⁰² Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 238.

to family, friends, business associates, and their face-to-face faith communities. We often talk about aging parents, lost loves, relationship challenges, issues of fidelity and honesty, in short, the normal and natural list of human challenges that ministers are faced with on a daily basis in face-to-face meetings in their church offices. Real people are behind the avatars. The interactions they have, for better or worse, are real human interactions.

A different question is what happens when we move from scripts that allow avatars to hug each other or engage in all kinds of activities from skiing to fishing to having dinner, to a script that depicts one avatar presiding at a Communion table and then distributing the virtual bread and cup to avatars who appear to receive and consume the elements? I admit a certain amount of reticence on my own part although I am completely at ease in any number of depictions of human interactions in Second Life. Notwithstanding the ease of avatar conversation and the fact that I am quite comfortable conducting a service of prayer, reading, and reflection interweaving music to enhance the experience, I cringe a bit when considering the idea that we might one day include Communion as part of the service. I struggle with the question, “Would it be real or would it make a mockery of a central sacrament that defines my identity as a Christian?”

Virtual interaction in a ministry context should not be engaged to the exclusion of human face-to-face interaction. Instead, these virtual ministry experiences ought to be used to enhance, extend, or encourage people to become part of a face-to-face faith community. What about situations where this is not possible? For example, what about people who live in remote locations where there are no faith communities that accept

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people into their midst? What about people who are home bound either short or long term due to illness or mobility issues? Are we to relegate these people to a life that does not include participation in a service that includes Communion? This thought leaves me far colder than considering avatars enacting a Communion service in Second Life.

Feminist liberation theologian Carter Heyward in a sermon preached at Episcopal Divinity School on All Saints Day in 1983 puts it very clearly.

The doctrine of “election,” however interpreted, can be postulated only on an assumption that God has chosen certain people and not others to participate in the “mystical” body of Christ. Why must our faith rest on the grounds of exclusivity and special privilege? More to the point, *can* our faith stand on these grounds? I believe not. Our God, the One whom Jesus loved, does not pick and choose... God continues to choose us all. We are the ones who elect, select, sort out, and decide in relation to one another where we shall stand and how we shall live as members of this mystical body. This is a very real and very present body of all people, those who have died, and those who are still alive in the world.¹⁰³

We are only skimming the surface here considering whether its even possible to consider offering Holy Communion within the context of Christian ministry in Second Life. Yet it seems clear that unless we attach some particular ontological change to the elements as they reside on an altar during a Communion service, there appears to be all kinds of possibilities for experiencing the connection that is inherent in participation in Communion in virtual environments.

¹⁰³ Carter Heyward, *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 61.

Holy Communion remembers the life of the man Jesus who died on a cross 2000 years ago and acknowledges the presence of God here with us in real time in the presence of the risen Christ. We also call into our presence and celebrate the communion of saints that includes those who have already died and those who are not yet born. Surely then, we can include a person living with us at this time in history who happens to be separated by physical distance on the planet. If we can transcend 2000 years and welcome the dead into our midst, it does not seem a far stretch to also welcome someone who is with us via the Internet. The sacrament of Holy Communion is a moment out of time and space designed to break down those barriers. Perhaps it is time to include cyberspace in that breaking of barriers.

Chapter 5 Virtual Lessons for the Real-Life Church

Most faith communities in Second Life are established as outreach ministries designed to welcome new people and give them an experience of the particular faith tradition, doctrines, or theology of the group. These groups can be governed by the same kinds of exclusionary mechanisms that are in place in the real world. Some groups continue to preach and teach a theology of exclusion insisting that LGBT people, for instance, are not worthy to be part of the faith community. Some even ban certain avatars from attending insisting that they conform to the group's idea of what constitutes and acceptable avatar but in many cases, since sacraments are not enacted in Second Life, people who show up to services or other events are not required to pass a litmus test of their worthiness for sacramental participation. In this way, people are really free to "try on" the community. They are welcome to attend, participate, and really grow into the community whether or not they have ever been baptized or taken communion. These matters are left to one's own conscience and to one's own relationship to God without requiring a public profession of faith or act of repentance or membership.

Sacraments are not the only vehicles from which hierarchy can be enforced. Architecture can also be used as a form of establishing who is in and who is out as well as setting out who is in charge and who is put into a position of submission to authority. Traditionally represented worship spaces, such as the

Anglican Cathedral in Second Life,¹⁰⁴ can and do set the altar far apart from the gathered congregation, the leader stands in front of an assembly in “airplane seating” set in rows front to back, thus making a clear distinction between leader and people. St. Matthews by the Sea Episcopal¹⁰⁵ also uses a traditional approach in its worship space design reflecting its more traditional liturgical style that is most often the service of Compline.

Both of these ministries are lead by lay and ordained people but the traditional language of the Book of Common Prayer combined with these traditional looking meeting spaces conspire to reinforce an ecclesial hierarchy that sets apart leaders from people. This setting apart can also leave the unfortunate impression that the business of mission and ministry is confined to those in leadership positions and that the function of mission and ministry happens only inside the worship services.

The Koinonia congregation is one of the oldest Christian congregations in Second Life. Koinonia, founded by a UCC seminarian that has since finished her MDiv and is not ordained, has recently disbanded. For five years, people met weekly for prayer and meditation with music and sacred readings forming a basis for discussion or a short reflection led by one of several people, including the

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix Figure 1

¹⁰⁵ See Appendix Figure 2

founder who was very active in the ministry. The worship space for Koinonia¹⁰⁶ is quite non-traditional. It is circular with the leader sitting within the circle set apart only by the proximity to the cross and the color of the chair.

The worship space of Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life is traditional in some ways and very modern in others. The footprint of the building is shaped in the traditional image of a cross as many cathedral churches are constructed. Yet the worship space was designed to be circular to help break down the kind of hierarchies that can be inadvertently established in more traditional formats. Additionally, there are symbols of most of the world's major religious traditions present in the space. This reduces the exclusivity of setting apart Christianity as the perceived "best" religion and provides a distinct welcome to those of other faith traditions who visit the site or attend services.

In Second Life, the leaders of gatherings for the purpose of worship may or may not be ordained. We do not know of a single Christian group in Second Life that enacts the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Most will not discuss performing marriage or holy union rites there and only occasionally is a funeral held for someone who has actually died in real life. This lack of performance of sacramental ritual leaves open the option for worship leaders to be allowed to offer their ministry as lay people even in traditions that require the presence of clergy to enact sacramental rituals.

¹⁰⁶ See Appendix Figure 3

It is important not to leave the impression that Second Life is a completely egalitarian society. Those who are leading worship in Second Life often have ownership or other privileges that allows them to build structures, contour the land, install furnishings, set up worship areas in ways that are meaningful, and most importantly to both invite people by means of using notices or instant messages (IM's) on group lists to services. These owners also have the power to eject and ban avatars from the area if they deem that avatar to be a threat to order and peace. In some ways, these privileges far exceed real-life powers both to invite and to limit the physical participation of others in worship. It is important to remember that when using this power, we are affecting the real-life experience of another human being not just ejecting an avatar from a game.

In general, people move their avatars into community to attend worship, discussions, Bible studies, and book studies, for the purpose of private or personal meditation, spiritual enrichment, and connecting with others. The perceived power in these gatherings is not located in the leader or the owner of the land but rather in a more egalitarian model contextually not unlike the kind of authority in community that Letty Russell described as Round Table Leadership in her book *Church in the Round*.¹⁰⁷ Christian leadership in the communities we referred to above really is a “legitimated power or authority” given for a specific moment in

¹⁰⁷ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round*, 63-65.

time by those who are assembled to enjoy and participate in whatever gathering has been called together. The aim of such leadership is focused on the “empowerment of others” and assisting “members of the congregation in making use of their gifts in the service of Christ’s love in the world.”¹⁰⁸

One of the most powerful lessons I learned in this regard happened in a book study co-led with a clergy colleague from Virginia last year. Rev. Dr. Kharmia Amos and I decided to conduct a book study of Karen Armstrong’s new book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* in Second Life instead of in real life. She invited members of her congregation to create an avatar and attend the study online for a period of 15 weeks. The idea was born out of a desire to give her congregation the opportunity to meet and study without leaving their home, to expand their horizons by entertaining the virtual world of Second Life, and to widen the pool of participants to include folks from Second Life with members of her congregation.

Very early in the process, one of her congregants indicated that she felt oppressed by my avatar standing behind the lectern to present a portion of the study. She challenged us to shorten our presentations to allow for more discussion time. She then complained that the view she had of the assembled avatars from her seated position was only that of the backs of their heads. Kharmia and I, delighted with these suggestions, immediately changed our presentations so

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 66.

that our avatars remained seated as we spoke. We opened up our presentations to include discussion embedded even within the presentations themselves. In addition, we included instructions for everyone that would allow them to utilize the unique feature in Second life that allows their avatar to remain seated while they move their “camera angle” all around the space even setting it to look at all the faces of those assembled as they attended and interacted. This would be the same view that a real-life leader would have of the group if standing in front of them leading from a position of perceived power.

These changes decentered power away from the leadership and placed it squarely into the hands and hearts of the participants. The level of interaction and participation increased dramatically, and the satisfaction level of the participants increased. It is important to note that this kind of challenge would not have been possible if the group had been meeting in real life. This woman would probably never have considered asking her pastor or any other leader to sit down with the gathered community rather than standing in a position that denotes authority. Because the location of power is decentered, in the absence of the perceived authority of clergy that is reinforced by the mediation of the sacraments in the context of weekly face-to-face worship, this participant felt very comfortable articulating the kinds of changes that would make her feel more comfortable in this alien environment. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could solicit this kind of

feedback from our new members in our real-life congregations and implement changes based on power sharing and Round Table Connection?¹⁰⁹

There are also unique opportunities in the way liturgy is experienced to provide a message of inclusion and welcome. At Sunshine Cathedral we play recorded music as part of the service and the worship leaders use audio voice controls to transmit their real-life voice leading prayers, reading sacred texts, and delivering a short reflection for the day. In addition we cut an paste text from the service leaflet and the written copy of the weekly reflection into what is known as “local chat” so that everyone can read the text of what is being said in context. Someone who is hearing impaired for instance or who cannot listen to sound for one reason or another can still “see” the words of the service as if it were a sort of “closed caption” version of the audio. Often we include song lyrics in this text as well. We also provide an electronic service leaflet to each participant as they enter the worship space, giving them the order of service and including all of the responses that those gathered are invited to enter into “local chat.”¹¹⁰ This provides a way to really participate in the service and have the experience of seeing the participation of others. This type of engagement enhances the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 24-27.

¹¹⁰ Local chat is a text field available in the interface that allows anyone to enter text that can be read by all others in close physical proximity. It is the equivalent of speaking loudly enough to be heard in a group of people.

experience of communal worship and the sharing of prayer requests, all of which are designed to give the message of welcome and inclusion to all who attend.

As we said before we do not intend to imply that Second Life itself is more egalitarian or less authoritarian. Indeed, in some ways it is less egalitarian than real life. However, the decentering nature produced by functioning within the technology, combined with the personal power that is a product of literally creating our avatar to appear in any way we choose, gives the real people behind the avatar a sense of individual power that allows folks to claim their own authority. When this flattened power dynamic is met with a sense of common purpose and shared power in a community of faith, this medium allows us to experiment with possibilities that we might consider creating in our real-life faith communities - experiments that would allow each member to feel empowered by the spirit of God's presence that animates their real-life bodies to come together in community.

There is also an altered sense of what is public and what is private in Second Life. Nearly everything is considered public so this makes for an interesting laboratory to experiment with how we might be able to motivate the people behind the avatars in Second Life to become more actively engaged in their real lives. This sense of all space being public space in Second Life makes way for the kind of engagement that Loren Mead refers to in his book *Transforming Congregations for the Future*. I was amazed to note his "Ten

Characteristics of a Good Congregation” wherein he expands on Parker Palmer’s thoughts about public life and how they apply to Second Life.¹¹¹ Here I will use five of Meade’s characteristics with my own commentary as follows:

1. Strangers meet on common ground.¹¹² People meet on the common ground of technology from all around the world and from many different faith traditions.
2. Fear of the stranger is faced and dealt with.¹¹³ It is completely commonplace to meet someone new each and every time one interacts in Second Life. While familiarity certainly exists there, is a constant destabilizing effect of meeting new people that requires us to face our fear of people whom we do not yet know.
3. Life is given color, texture, drama, a festive air.¹¹⁴ The simple fact that the virtual world appears to be a very sophisticated animated experience transports most of us to a childhood world of cartoon characters and magical possibilities.

¹¹¹ Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations For the Future* (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1994), 48.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 50.

4. People are drawn out of themselves.¹¹⁵ The perceived anonymity of Second Life functions in a similar way to the analyst's couch or the confessional booth. This allows people to interact in more authentic ways and reveal more of themselves than they might otherwise be able to in real life.
5. People are empowered and protected against power.¹¹⁶ In Second Life people do have power that they do not have in real life. For instance they can fly! They can come and go as they please without the constraints of time and space that most of us are limited by in real life. People can engage in multiple private conversations simultaneously, can change their perspective without moving their body, and can even create their outward appearance in a manner of their own choosing. Simultaneously the reality is that one cannot be killed in Second Life. In the context of being in a service or study or meeting of any kind at Sunshine Cathedral, we who have ownership of the space have the power to protect people from being harassed or emotionally abused. As we discussed previously, folks who are there to attack or abuse others can be easily and quickly ejected and

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

banned. We never do this lightly. Nevertheless, we do have the power to stop emotional abuse and harassment when we are aware that it is occurring.

We have endeavored here to illustrate how the virtual world of Second Life is similar and how it is different from the “real world.” Some of the freedom to implement and experiment with being church and exercising ministry is based in very down to earth realities. For instance building a church and maintaining a presence in Second Life is financially feasible for any individual and is a small investment for any existing congregation as an outreach ministry. The resistance to performing the ritual acts of sacraments serves as means to deconstruct the hierarchies that underpin these rituals. Leadership is not restricted to the ordained. There are many opportunities for lay leadership. This breaking down of ecclesial hierarchies decenters the self-centered view of mission as something outside the church or something the church does.¹¹⁷ However, a more thoughtful look at ecclesiology and mission is necessary if we are to take full advantage of these destabilizing facts. Otherwise we are in danger of simply reenacting hierarchy in various forms as a result of unexamined privilege by those serving in leadership positions.

There is real value in having familiar surroundings that remind people of the churches of their youths like the traditional architecture of the Anglican

¹¹⁷ Duraisingh, “From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church,” 10.

Cathedral in Second Life. There is value in breaking down these images in a way that Koinonia has broken them down with pews replaced by relaxing chairs and cushions on the floor arranged in a circle. Including the symbols of other religions at Sunshine Cathedral reminds us that Christianity is not the supersessionist end of God's revelatory action in the world.

Just as our worship spaces can reinforce the idea that mission is something the church does rather than something that it is, so too can our theology of *how* we carry this message. By making the service available in text and audio, we increase accessibility for those who may be hearing or sight challenged. Because the services occur online those with mobility issues can freely participate. Since participants do not use their own voice, we leave it to each person to choose what gender representation they want to express. Empowering people in this way is a potent message that each person is important, valued, and necessary for sharing the Good News. Showing respect in these ways is a powerful model for the importance of living our lives ethically and showing respect to others as integral to God's mission and our ministry.

If we someday consider, for instance, enacting the Eucharist in Second Life, we have the opportunity to take it "more seriously, yet also more playfully, as the enactment of a God-inspired freedom,"¹¹⁸ as Tom Driver says. He goes

¹¹⁸ Tom F. Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), 195.

further to point out, “Since the message of the gospel is liberation, and since a sacrament celebrating that gospel is the performance of a freedom, a Christian sacrament tends to break through any particular form.”¹¹⁹ No doubt there will be many who question whether people who are not together in one physical space can participate in sacraments like Holy Communion. Tom Driver asserts that, “Genuine presence is mutual presence.”¹²⁰

If one day we embark upon performing Holy Communion or Eucharist in Second Life, we need not reinscribe the hierarchical ecclesiology of any particular group in real life. Since such a performance will be excessively controversial in any case, it will behoove us to take care that it is designed to empower the participants in ways that will remind them that it is *their* work in the world. We will do well to take care to remind people to carry the Good News of God’s love out into the world without reinforcing that they are beholden to clergy who alone are allowed to consecrate and distribute the elements. Sharing Eucharist in Second Life then might become an act of sharing power and acknowledging a collective responsibility for ministry.

Second Life attracts people from all over the world, from different faith traditions and no faith tradition at all. What we do as a faith community in Second Life must have an inherent value to those who participate in it.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 202.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 211.

Identification with the community must add something to the lives of the very real people who inhabit the avatar that is presented as their persona in Second Life. That “something” that is necessary is what I have come to understand as the real ministry of the church in the world.

God’s mission of love, in this context, is the absolute focus of ministry in Second Life. The faith communities that endure and thrive are communities that assist the participants in deepening their connection to God and to others by means of recalling familiar patterns of worship without reinscribing power structures that determine the inclusion or exclusion of persons. These patterns of worship are not the “point” of gathering. Rather, the point of gathering is to experience a corporate act of affirming what it means to be a person of faith. That meaning is rooted in our impulse to tell the Good News of God’s love for us. This is, as Peter Hodgson describes it, “a mission of service....Such service ought to be liberating rather than authoritarian, collegial rather than hierarchical, inclusive rather than exclusive... a ministry of Spirit rather than of the letter.”¹²¹

Letty Russell describes this shift as the church understanding that it “does not have a mission; rather it participates in God’s Mission in the redemption of all humanity and the restoration of creation.”¹²² She goes on to indicate that the church does not mediate God’s action, rather it should become more modest,

¹²¹ Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church*, 43.

¹²² Russell, *Church in the Round*, 88.

understanding itself as a symbol or instrument of God's action already in progress.¹²³ Christopher Duraisingh describes this shift in thinking saying that the critical issue we have to determine is "what theology is". He says, " We are in need of a missiological agenda for theology rather than just a theological agenda for mission."¹²⁴

The virtual world of Second Life gives us a unique opportunity both to rethink ecclesial structures and missiological agendas for theology, and to experiment with alternatives that might be difficult, if not impossible, in real life. It is important to remember that the point of ministry in Second Life is not a fascination with the technology or a need to change liturgy or practice for the sake of change. The point is to provide a vehicle for allowing people to access the assurance of God's love for all of humanity and participate in rebuilding the world as co-creators with God of a realm of peace and justice-love that empowers and liberates us all.

¹²³ Ibid, 89.

¹²⁴ Duraisingh, "From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church," 28.

Chapter 6 A Theology of Transformation

Our goal in this project was to study whether ministry in the virtual world of Second Life is ethical and effective for spiritual development of individuals in the formation of faith community. I believe we have shown here that despite the obvious differences, being church in Second Life is remarkably similar to being church in real-life face-to-face communities. I think our experience in Second Life offers us some unique opportunities to look at the ministry of the church in some fresh new ways and gives us some new insights into how carrying out that mission must shift and change.

We have discussed here that our view of the ministry of the church is to share the Good News that God is present with us and that God loves us unconditionally, extravagantly, and passionately. What does this really mean for our lives? The fact is that if we carry this message, fulfilling God's mission as the church, transformation occurs. Individual lives are transformed from a focus on self-centered fear that drives greed and anger into lives based on loving relationships and service. Communities and institutions are freed from the burden of existing solely to keep themselves in business and are transformed into entities that focus on working for justice both inside and outside the organization. Logically this individual and institutional transformation has broader implications to give us hope for the transformation of entire societies and cultural systems.

The virtual world of Second Life requires us to rethink both the how and why of what it means to be church. It is easy in real life to see the status quo of institutional church as something that has so much inertia that it cannot be easily affected. We have our buildings, our prayer books, our sacramental rituals, our hymns, our outreach programs, our altar guilds, and vestries. It is easy to become convinced that the church is actually the building within which we meet. In our most enlightened thoughts, we can often only move to thinking that the church is the people who attend it and do the work of what we call “mission.”

When faced with being church in Second Life, we have to start with the question, “Why bother?” Our answer to that does not come from a historical view that has at its core the answer, “Because we’ve always had a church.” My own personal answer came when I realized the deep need that the people behind the avatars in Second Life have to know God’s love, to experience God’s presence, and to discover the transformative power that the knowledge of these things can have in their lives.

Virtual ministry, particularly church in Second Life, decenters power, and expands our reach to people. It gives us access to an intimacy with people who might never otherwise enter a real-life church building or risk being involved with an institutional church that has excluded them or shamed them. Second Life gives us a second chance to look at why we do ministry and to look beyond “the way we’ve always done it” to find new and innovative ways to spread the Good News

of God's love. It is the relationships that we form that are the vehicles to transmit that love and sense of presence to those who do not yet have a personal knowledge of it. This is the transformative power of the gospel, and not the tired doctrines of exclusion and sin that have defined Christianity for millennia.

When we begin our theology with the thought, "How can we include as many people as possible and make sure they know they are loved," we let go of the power structures that hold hierarchies in tact. When our mission becomes centered in transmitting the message that God is here with us and loves us, we tend to be less concerned with adherence to particular doctrines. We become aware that how we do ministry must change. It is not enough to worry about the budget and keep the building in good repair. It is not enough to insist on good music and beautiful liturgy so that the theatre of Sunday morning worship is aesthetically pleasing. It is not enough to view mission as a list of programs and outreach ministries that we participate in as a group. If we are to consider a theology of transformation we must first allow our own thought processes to be transformed and open up to new possibilities for ourselves, for our congregations, for our communities.

As we grow from childhood to adulthood we are required to let go of play and magical thinking in favor of rational thought and a so-called realistic view of the world. Yet as people of faith, we profess that the most real thing in our lives is the love of God and our knowledge of God's presence with us in the form of the

Holy Spirit sent to comfort and assure us that we are never alone in our yearning for justice. As Christians, we are constantly strengthened by the teachings of Jesus and by the triumph of the risen Christ over death and the grave. These are the things that we say we believe. These are the things that allow us to step out in faith to spread the Good News of God's love to all people. In so doing, we will come to respect difference and diversity, offer support and encouragement, and allow the transformative power of love to move in the lives of those around us.

Love transforms us. It opens our eyes and our hearts. It helps us reach our true potential. It is the basis of everything that Jesus did and all the lessons that he taught. A theology of transformation begins with Jesus' teaching which we call the Greatest Commandment found in Matthew 22:36-40.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

If we are to do as Jesus commanded us in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) to “tell them everything that I command you,” we look to another teaching in

1 John 4:7-12 that proclaims the joy of authentic love:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love...Dear friends, since God so loves us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

If we allow ourselves to imagine a world that values inclusion over exclusion, love over hate, we will recognize that we are all part of one human family. A theology of transformation requires us to begin with the magical thought that everything is possible and then bring to bear all our intellect, all our creativity, and all our commitment to spread the Good News of God's love as our primary mission. This just might change everything.

Appendix

Figure 1

Anglican Cathedral in Second Life Interior

Note the altar set far apart from the assembly and the leader of the service standing in front of the pews arranged in “airplane seating” fashion reinforcing a hierarchy of the separateness of leader and people.



Figure 2

St. Matthew's by the Sea Episcopal Church Interior

This space is used primarily for the traditional Anglican service of Compline and therefore is set up in a traditional Anglican chapel style. Note the pews are set at a slight angle and there is no pulpit so that the leader is either seated with the rest of the congregation or stands in the assembly.



Figure 3

Koinonia interior

This space is set in a circular arrangement with non-traditional seating.. The cross in the center interior and the presence of the Advent wreath provide anchors of traditional elements of Christian tradition. The leader sits in the orange chair in the center nearest the cross.



Figure 4

Sunshine Cathedral interior and exterior



This interior is arranged in a circle with the leader standing at a lectern in front. In the center is the advent wreath.

During book studies and other meetings that are not worship services the leader sits in the assembly. Note that there is no traditional altar or cross symbols.

This space is designed to be used by multiple faith traditions and is intentional about including the symbols of many religions in the dome that serves as both the interior and exterior roof of the main meeting area.





Additionally the exterior is laid out in the traditional cathedral form of a cross while the worship space is expanded to a circular area giving the final form of the building the image of a Celtic cross.

Bibliography

Book of Common Prayer. The Church Hymnal Corporation and The Seabury Press, 1979.

Attias, Monica. Reconciliation and the Eucharist – Heart and World. In *Living the Eucharist*, ed. Steven Conway, 13-24. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd.

Avis, Paul. *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology*. New York: T&T Clark, 2007.

Beckwith, Roger T. *Daily and Weekly Worship: Jewish to Christian*. First Grove Books Limited. Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books Limited, 1987.

Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Boff, Leonardo. *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*. New York: Crossroads, 1985.

Cheng, Patrick S. *Radical Love: an Introduction to Queer Theology*. New York: Seabury Books, 2011.

Dix, Dom Gregory. *The Shape of the Liturgy*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1982.

Driver, Tom F. *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998.

Duraisingh, Christopher. "From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church." *The Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 7-28.

——— "Encountering Difference in a Plural World: A Pentecost Paradigm for Mission," in *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*. Edited by Ian T. Douglas. New York: Church Publishing, 2002.

Edwards, David L. *What Anglicans Believe in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Mowbray/Cassell, 2000.

Ellison, Marvin. *Same-Sex Marriage? : A Christian Ethical Analysis*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004.

- Gaster, Theodor Herzl. *Passover: Its History and Traditions*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1984.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted," *The New Yorker*,
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell
 (accessed February 26, 2012).
- Hall, A. C. A. *A Companion to the Prayer Book: A Liturgical and Spiritual Exposition of the Services for the Holy Communion, Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Litany*. New York: E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1902.
- Hall, Stuart G. *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*. 2nd ed. London: SPCK, 2005.
- Harrington, Daniel J., and James F. Keenan. *Jesus and Virtue Ethics : Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology*. Lanham, Md: Sheed & Ward, 2002.
- Harrison, Beverly Wildung. *Justice in the Making*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.
- Heyward, Carter. *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1989.
- Hess, Mary E. *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can't Leave Behind*. Lanham, Md.: Sheed & Ward, 2005.
- Hodgson, Peter C. *Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Hoekendijk, J.C. *Church Inside Out*. New edition ed. Edited by L.A. Hoedemaker and Pieter Tijmes. Translated by Isaac C. rottenberg. London: SCM Press LTD, 1969.
- Ingle, Larry. "Living the Truth, Speaking to Power,"
http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers/living_the_truth.htm. (accessed February 27, 2012).

- Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marc Z. Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011.
- Linden Lab, "About Second Life," Linden Lab, <http://lindenlab.com/about>, (accessed February 26, 2012).
- McAdoo, H.R., and Kenneth W. Stevenson. *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition*. Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1995.
- McGowan, Andrew. *Ascetic Eucharists*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.
- Malaby, Thomas M. *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.
- Match.com. "Stay Up to Date: Introducing the Official Match.com Blog," Match.com. <http://blog.match.com/2010/05/17/stay-up-to-date-introducing-the-official-match-com-blog/> (accessed February 17, 2012).
- Mead, Loren B. *Transforming Congregations For the Future*. Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1994.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Mudge, Lewis. *Rethinking the Beloved Community: Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, Social Theory*. New York: Consul Oecumenique, 2000.
- Puhl, Rebecca M., Marlene B. Schwartz, and Kelly D. Brownell. "Impact of Perceived Consensus On Stereotypes About Obese People: A New Approach For Reducing Bias." *Health Psychology* 24, no. 5 (September 2005): 517-25.
- Quin, Cosslett. *At the Lord's Table: a theological and devotional commentary on the Holy Communion Service according to the Anglican Rite of 1662*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1954.
- Reid, J. K. S., trans. *Calvin: Theological Treatises*. Vol. 22 of *Calvin: Theological Treatises*. The Library of Christian Classics. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954.

- Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading On the Electronic Frontier*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000.
- Russell, Letty M. *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.
- Schillinger, Raymond. "Social Media and the Arab Spring: What Have We Learned?" Huffington Post World, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/raymond-schillinger/arab-spring-social-media_b_970165.html, (accessed February 18, 2012).
- SR Education Group. "Guide to Online Schools," <http://www.guidetoonlineschools.com/> (accessed February 17, 2012).
- Teague, Michael. "New Media and the Arab Spring," Al Jadid Magazine, <http://www.aljadid.com/content/new-media-and-arab-spring>, (accessed February 18, 2012).
- Wagner, Rachel. *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2011.
- Watson, Natalie K. *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008.
- Young, Pamela Dickey. *Re-Creating the Church: Communities of Eros*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press Int'l, 2000.